

Legend of the Galactic Heroes, Vol. 2: *Ambition*

Yoshiki Tanaka

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The cover art depicts a dramatic space battle. In the foreground, a large, metallic, spherical spaceship with two prominent circular ports and a blue glowing band is shown from a low angle. In the background, several other complex, multi-winged spaceships are engaged in combat, with one emitting a bright orange flame. The scene is set against a dark, star-filled space with a vibrant blue and white nebula on the right side.

LEGEND OF THE GALACTIC HEROES

VOLUME 2

AMBITION

YOSHIKI TANAKA

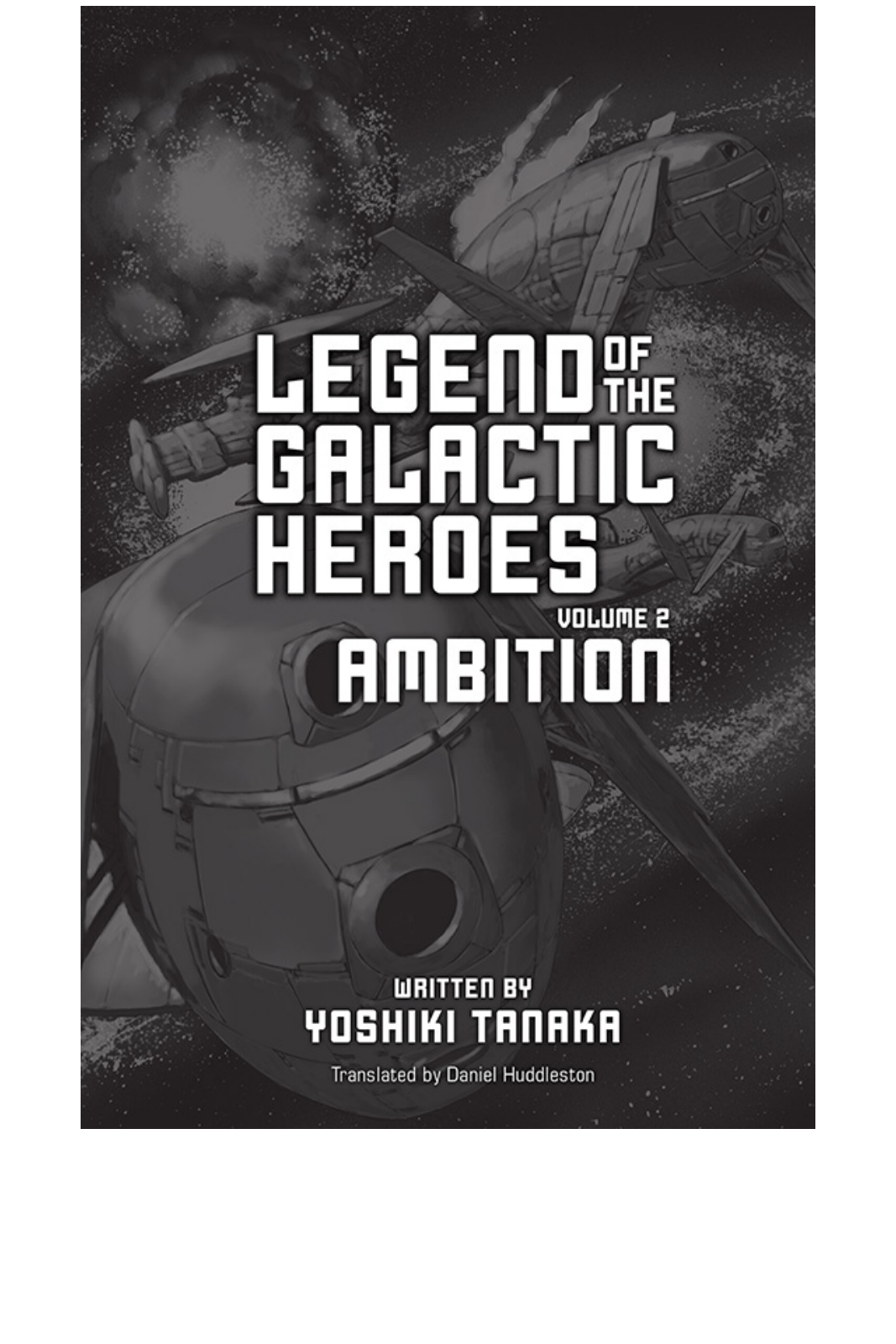
Translated by Daniel Huddleston

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THE
GALACTIC
HEROES**
VOLUME 2
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SAN FRANCISCO



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MAJOR CHARACTERS



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CHAPTER 1

BEFORE THE STORM

A hundred billion stars gleamed with a hundred billion lights. Those lights were weak, however, and the greater part of space's infinite expanse was dominated by obsidian darkness.

A night with no end. An infinite void. Coldness to beggar the imagination. The universe did not reject the human race. It simply ignored humanity altogether. The universe was vast, though to humans there never seemed to be enough room. This was because space only had meaning to humans within the range that they could perceive and act in it.

Humans divided the universe up prosaically—into regions inhabitable and uninhabitable, into regions navigable and unnavigable. And those most hapless of humans—professional soldiers—divided all the stars and all of space into regions controlled by the enemy and controlled by allies, regions to be seized and to be defended, and regions where battle was easy and where it was difficult.

None of these divisions had names originally. To distinguish recognizable zones, minuscule humans spoke of them in symbols of their own devising.

There was a region of space called the Iserlohn Corridor—a long and narrow tunnel of safety running through an unnavigable stretch of galactic space. Through its interior there flew a solitary battleship. Under the light of a G0 star, its streamlined hull would probably have gleamed silverfish gray, and the inscription of its name, *Ulysses*, would have stood out in vivid clarity.

Ulysses. This ship, named for that hero of ancient legend, belonged to the Iserlohn Patrol Fleet of the Free Planets Alliance.

Six months prior, *Ulysses* had been a part of the Alliance Navy's Eighth Fleet. That fleet had fought in the battle of the Amritsar Stellar Region—the largest-scale military clash in human history—where over 90 percent of its ships and personnel had been lost forever. With this defeat had come the dissolution of the fleet itself. Its scant survivors had been shuffled off to other fleets and bases.

Ulysses, hero of many a battle, had faced many life-or-death struggles and lived to tell the tale. The ship itself was such a hero. Its crew as well.

That said, the name of the battleship *Ulysses* was not so much an object of respect now as it was fodder for benign joking.

In the Battle of Amritsar, the damage taken by *Ulysses* had been light. All that

had been destroyed was the bacterial wastewater treatment system, but that had resulted in the crew having to fight while ankle deep in regurgitated sewage.

Awaiting *Ulysses* upon its return was a most undesirable descriptor—"the battleship with the broken toilets."

Lieutenant Commander Nilson, the ship's captain, and his first officer, Sublieutenant Eda, had reeked to high heaven by the time they reached Iserlohn, and those who greeted them, saying "Good work" and the like, had done so in tones hardly suited to their sentiments. Still, in the face of a numbingly miserable defeat in which 70 percent of the thirty million deployed had been lost, perhaps people needed *Ulysses*—whether as the start of a conversation or the butt of a joke—in order to keep themselves from becoming mentally unhinged. Cold comfort though that might be for the crew, even assuming it were true.

At present, *Ulysses* was away from Iserlohn Fortress on patrol duty. These patrol missions had long served as training for the crew, but beyond this region of space—brimming with variable stars, red giants, and irregular gravitational fields—there waited a human danger even more vast. The territory of the Free Planets Alliance extended only so far as the region surrounding Iserlohn; beyond lay the vast spread of the Galactic Empire's frontier. In times past, this region had on many occasions been witness to large-scale combat, and from time to time, fragments of spaceships destroyed centuries ago were still discovered here.

Captain Nilson's hulking frame rose up from the command seat. An operator had reported the sighting of an unidentified spacecraft. *Ulysses's* enemy detection system, like those of the other ships, consisted of radar, mass-detection sensors, energy-measuring devices, swarms of advance-surveillance satellites, and more—and all of them were responding. What they had detected was not a fleet but a single vessel.

"There aren't any friendlies in this sector now, are there?"

"No, sir. At present, not a single friendly vessel in this sector."

"Then process of elimination tells us it's an enemy. All hands, alert level one!"

Alarms rang out, and the adrenaline levels of 140 crew members began to skyrocket. Voices shot back and forth from every department—*Distance thirty-three light-seconds ... Rail cannons condition green ... Heat cannons ready ... Viewscreen photoflux adjustments completed*—and the captain, in a strikingly resonant voice, ordered that a transmission be sent giving the mutually understandable signal:

"Halt your vessel. If you fail to comply, we will attack."

It was five minutes later that a reply came back to the tense, sweating crew. The communications officer who received it cocked his head in bewilderment as he handed his tablet to the captain. Written there was the following:

We've no desire to exchange blows. We seek negotiations and humbly entreat you to honor this request.

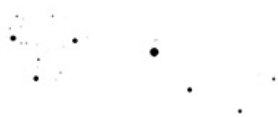
"Negotiations?" Captain Nilson murmured, as if seeking confirmation from himself. First officer Eda crossed his arms.

"It's been a while since the last one, but I wonder if we might have ourselves a visitor."

By which he meant "a defector."

“In any case, the detailed examination comes later. Don’t stand down from battle stations yet. Tell them to stop engines and link up their comm screen.”

Captain Nilson took off his uniform beret, all black save for its white five-pointed star mark, and used it to fan his face. It would be best if a mutual slaughter could be avoided. After all, even if he won, his ship wouldn’t come away without casualties. He stared at the enemy vessel that had floated into sight on one of his viewscreens. It was not so different in appearance from *Ulysses*, and Captain Nilson wondered: *Are the people in there also waiting on pins and needles, sweating just like we are?*



Iserlohn was an artificial planet positioned on the border between the territories of the Galactic Empire and the Free Planets Alliance, revolving around the star Artena. Located in the very center of the Iserlohn Corridor, it was impossible to launch a military incursion into either side’s territory without first passing it. Constructed by the empire and stolen by the alliance, this artificial world was sixty kilometers in diameter. If its interior were cut into thin slices, it could be divided into several thousand floors. On its surface was a multilayered armor of ultrahardened steel, crystalline fiber, and superceramic, all treated with beam-resistant mirror coating. To secure the fortress, four layers of this armor were piled one atop the other.

It was equipped for every function that a strategic base required: offense, defense, resupply, R & R, maintenance, medical, communications, space traffic control, intelligence gathering. Its spaceport could berth twenty thousand vessels, and its repair shops could service four hundred simultaneously. Its hospitals had two hundred thousand beds. Its arsenals could manufacture 7,500 fusion missiles per hour.

The combined number of soldiers in the fortress and its patrol fleet rose to a total of two million, and an additional three million civilians were living inside it as well. The greater part of that number were family members of soldiers, though it also included those to whom the military had delegated the operation of lifestyle- and entertainment-related facilities. Among these were a number of establishments employing only women.

Although Iserlohn was a military fortress, it was also a huge city that boasted a population of five million. Among the galaxy’s inhabited worlds, not a few had populations that were smaller. Its societal infrastructure was also well-appointed. Schools it had had from the beginning, and in addition it was furnished with theaters, concert halls, a fifteen-floor sports center, maternity clinics, day cares, self-contained reservoir and drainage systems, hydrogen reactors doubling as freshwater recycling plants, vast botanical gardens that functioned as part of the oxygen supply system and as places for “forest therapy,” and hydroponics ranches that were primarily sources of vegetable protein and vitamins.

Serving as commander of both fortress and patrol fleet was the man ultimately responsible for this gargantuan city in space, the leader of its fighting forces, Free

II

It was hard for most people to imagine Yang Wen-li as one of the top VIPs in the FPA military. First of all, he didn't look like a military man, not even when in uniform.

He was not some thoughtful-looking old gentleman with perfect posture. Nor was he some huge muscle-bound giant. Neither did he have the appearance of a coolheaded genius or a pasty-faced young nobleman.

He was thirty years old, though he looked two or three years younger than he was. His hair and eyes were black, his height and build average, and while he wasn't exactly *not* handsome, his looks certainly did not bespeak the value of the rare talent he possessed.

What was extraordinary about him was not what was outside his skull, but what was inside it. Last year, in SE 796, he had held a complete monopoly on the military successes of the Free Planets Alliance. He had stolen from the empire's hands the fortress Iserlohn, whose impregnability had been renowned in song, and done so without spilling a single drop of his troops' blood. In the Astarte and Amritsar Stellar Regions, the Alliance Armed Forces had suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the Imperial Navy Admiral Reinhard von Lohengramm, yet in both cases it had been Yang's calm and ingenious operational command that had rescued his compatriots from complete obliteration.

Had he not been there, the Free Planets Alliance's annals of war would have needed only one word to describe SE 796—*defeat*. That fact was admitted by all. It was for that reason that Yang had been promoted from commodore to full admiral in less than one year. The young admiral, however, had hardly been moved to tears by this exceptional advancement. For although he was a master of warfare whose like was nowhere else to be found, Yang himself had discovered nothing of value in the thing called war.

More than once he had dreamed of retiring from the military to become a civilian of no special note, but he as yet had been unable to do so.

That day, he was enjoying a game of 3-D chess in his private quarters.

"Check!" shouted Julian Mintz.

Yang, scratching his black head of hair, conceded defeat. For some reason, it didn't look like he was ever going to be called a great admiral when it came to chess. "Oh well. So this makes seventeen straight losses?" He sighed, but there was neither frustration nor petulance in it.

"Eighteen," corrected Julian, flashing a smile. Still right in the middle of boyhood, he was only half as old as Yang. With his dark-brown eyes and flaxen hair that had subtle, natural waves, all agreed he was a handsome young man.

Three years ago, Julian had been sent to live with Yang thanks to the application of what was called Travers's Law, by which children of soldiers killed in action could be raised in the homes of other soldiers. He was a top student at school, the boys' top scorer for the year in the sport of flyball, and since receiving a status equivalent to lance corporal as a civilian employee of the military, had displayed an outstanding knack for sharpshooting. While it was all just a little embarrassing for his guardian Yang, it was also a source of pride.

“Julian’s one flaw,” Alex Caselnes—Yang’s sharp-tongued upperclassman from Officers’ Academy—had once opined, “is that he worships the ground you walk on, Yang. Honestly, that’s just terrible taste. If not for that, I’d gladly give him my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

The thirty-six year-old Caselnes had two daughters, actually, the elder of whom was seven.

Yang, having still not learned his lesson, said, “One more game.”

“You really want to have a nineteen-game losing streak? Not that I mind, but ...”

It had been Yang who had taught Julian to play 3-D chess, but it hadn’t taken the disciple even six months to surpass his master. Since then, the gap between their respective abilities had only widened. Still, whenever Julian described himself as being good at chess, it always stopped short of being anything more than a joke. This tendency wasn’t limited to chess, either, and trivial skills weren’t the issue; on a more fundamental level, Julian had it in his head that he could never come close to matching Yang in anything.

A soft chime sounded, and an attractive female officer with hazel eyes and golden-brown hair spoke from the visiphone screen. “Commander, this is Lieutenant Greenhill.” She had been working as Yang’s aide since last year and had recently been promoted.

“I’m kinda busy right now. What is it?” Yang’s tone sounded terribly unenthusiastic.

“An Imperial Navy battleship has arrived with an envoy. He wishes to see you on some urgent business.”

“Does he, now?”

Not sounding terribly surprised, Yang put the chess match on hold and stood up, but just as he was about to leave the room, Julian said, “Excellency, wait! You’ve forgotten your gun.” It was still lying on his desk where he’d tossed it earlier.

“Don’t need it, don’t need it,” the young admiral said irritably, waving away the suggestion.

“But going in unarmed is too—”

“Supposing I take a gun,” Yang said, “and supposing I fire it ... Do you really think I’ll even hit the guy?”

“Er ... no, sir.”

“Well then, there’s no point in my taking it, is there?”

Yang started walking immediately, and Julian, in a panic, followed after him.

It wasn’t that Yang was fearless and daring; he just saw human capability as a thing demarcated with sharp lines. He was the one who had caused impregnable Iserlohn to fall so easily, using a clever trick that not one other person had been able to anticipate. That had taught him all the more that there was no perfection where humans were concerned, and no absolute guarantees.

Yang—having never held the slightest intention of becoming a soldier, having aspired instead to the life of a historian—had learned through his studies that no matter how powerful a nation may be, it will eventually collapse without fail: that no matter how great the hero, after gaining power there comes a fall.

The same applied to life as well. A hero who has survived many battles dies from complications of influenza. The last one standing after a bloody power

struggle is felled by some unknown assassin. Former galactic emperor Ottfried III, afraid of being poisoned, eats next to nothing and finally wastes away.

“When your luck runs out, your luck runs out, even if you are being careful.”

Yang didn’t even take any guards. When he was first assigned to Iserlohn, he’d had four teams of twelve looking out for him in rotating shifts, but they had even been following him into the toilet, so he’d finally gotten fed up and dismissed them.

On the other hand, Yang did pay great attention to the workings of the fortress’s security system. Its control functions he divided among three different stations, putting them under mutual cross surveillance so that the system could not be hijacked without simultaneously gaining control of all three stations. In addition, he had devices added to the air-conditioning system that analyzed the local atmosphere’s component molecules to detect attempts at poisoning the fortress.

The security systems did not reflect Yang’s original intentions; there were military brass who wouldn’t shut up about them, as well as nervous subordinates, bureaucrats concerned that the budget wasn’t being spent, inspection-loving politicians, and journalists waiting with bated breath for something to go wrong. For these people, he had to do some PR so as to say, “See, the security system is perfect.”

“I can totally see how people’s thinking gets less and less pure as they rise higher and higher,” Yang had once grumbled to Julian.

Speaking like he was the grown-up in the room, Julian had replied, “If you understand that yourself, you won’t be swept along with them. As long as there aren’t unnecessary problems, don’t you think that’s good enough?” Then he had appended the following opinion: “What I worry about is that the higher you rise, the higher your alcohol intake is getting. Please try to lay off it a little.”

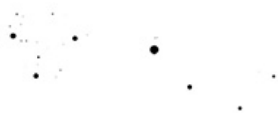
“Am I really drinking that much more?”

“At least five times what you did three years ago.”

“Five times? There’s no way it could be that much.”

Before Yang’s doubting eyes, Julian had produced three years’ worth of household expense data. The index of 100 applied to alcoholic beverage expenditures three years ago had risen to become 491. Since this number did not include the amount consumed outside the home, there had indeed been grounds for Julian’s insistence on an increase of fivefold or greater.

Unable to argue, Yang had promised to refrain from drinking, though both the promisor and promisee felt little confidence in how long he could keep it up.



Two hours later, Yang had his executive staff gather in the conference room. This was the storied chamber in which the commanders of Iserlohn Fortress and its permanently stationed fleet would meet back when the fortress had been under Imperial Navy control—where locking horns, arguing, then going their separate ways had been the norm.

The staff gathered around the table were as follows:

Rear Admiral Alex Caselnes, Fortress Administrative Director.

Commodore Walter von Schönkopf, Commander of Fortress Defenses.

Rear Admiral Fischer, Vice Commander of the Iserlohn Patrol Fleet.

Rear Admiral Murai, Chief of Staff.

Commodore Patrichev, Deputy Chief of Staff.

Captain Blood-Joe and Commander Lao, staff officers.

Lieutenant Frederica Greenhill, the commander's top aide.

Also present were Lieutenant Commander Nilson, captain of the battleship *Ulysses*, and its first officer, Sublieutenant Commander Eda.

Yang made a conventional show of looking around at the assembled officers' faces, then opened his mouth to speak. It wasn't really *him* to speak in grave and solemn cadences; he sounded more like he was talking to friends over a cup of tea.

"I think you all know this already, but the Imperial Navy battleship *Broken* has arrived as a military envoy with a rather interesting proposal. They want to do a prisoner swap of the two million POWs the empire and alliance are holding between them."

"So they're having a hard time feeding theirs, too," Caselnes said sarcastically. Of average height and with a plump, healthy-looking build, he was more a military bureaucrat than a soldier, with far more experience in the rear service than on the front lines. A master of desk work, he was a specialist at running supply lines, operating organizations, and managing facilities. After the defeat at Amritsar, the blame for the failure of the supply plan had been dumped on him—although that disaster had in fact been due to the ingenious strategy of Imperial Marshal von Lohengramm—and he had been shuffled off to a remote outpost before being reassigned to Iserlohn at Yang's request.

It was fair to say that Alex Caselnes was the de facto mayor of Iserlohn's city of five million. His ability to handle public administration would likely have proven useful even in larger and more complex organizations.

"That's probably part of it," said Yang. "In any case, I'm half to blame as well." When taking Iserlohn, Yang had acquired POWs in numbers equivalent to the vast city's population.

Commodore von Schönkopf smiled at the exchange. Thirty-three years old and refined in appearance, he was the one credited with having successfully executed Yang's plan. He was a man of noble birth, who had been brought as a small child from the empire to the alliance when his grandparents defected. He had both courage and intelligence to spare, and an indomitable spirit that was occasionally interpreted as dangerous. As for the man himself, he was ever calm, even in the face of suspicion and stares.

"Still, this really is no laughing matter," said Yang. "The phrase 'having a hard time feeding them' carries with it a serious implication—that circumstances may be not far off when there'll be no way for them to do so."

"Meaning?"

"Put simply, we should view this as a sign that Reinhard von Lohengramm has finally decided to get into an armed conflict with the highborns' confederacy."

When Yang spoke the name of that blond-haired youth, which the Alliance Navy considered its greatest threat, a deathly quiet fell across the entire chamber.



For the past few months, Yang had been thinking about it constantly: what to do about Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm as he inched ever closer to the seat of power in the Galactic Empire.

For Reinhard to secure absolute power, he would have to destroy a powerful group of highborn nobles who viewed him as an enemy. That would probably involve the outbreak of full-scale civil war. The intelligence that Yang had was by no means bountiful, but it was enough to make it clear that Reinhard was moving steadily forward with preparations for exactly such a conflict.

The problem was that Reinhard was setting the board not only within the empire, but within the Free Planets Alliance as well. Reinhard was not about to stand by and let the aristocrats' confederacy join hands with the FPA, or allow the Alliance Navy to strike both sides after they had exhausted themselves. The wounds that the Alliance Navy had suffered in its loss at Amritsar were still unhealed; they had nothing to spare for external campaigns, but Reinhard was apparently leaving nothing to chance.

So what should he do?

Yang tried analyzing the circumstances into which Reinhard had been thrust. There were certain limitations that Reinhard was saddled with, and there was no question he would make his plans in accordance with them.

Analyzed and arranged, the results looked like this:

1. Reinhard's forces would have their hands full just fighting against the confederacy of highborn nobles.
2. Opening a two-front operation would therefore be an impossibility.
3. Due to conditions 1 and 2, the thing to do was strike the FPA through subterfuge rather than military force.
4. To divide the enemy and set them against one another was the essence of conspiracy.

With Reinhard having advanced to this stage, Yang could guess what move was coming next: he would find some way to tear the Alliance Armed Forces apart from within!

That was what Reinhard would do. That was what he *had* to do. Even if Yang were standing in Reinhard's own shoes, he wouldn't be able to come up with anything else. If factions of the alliance military were fighting one another, Reinhard would be free to do battle with the highborn, without fear of being struck from behind.

Well then, what will he do specifically ... By the time Yang's thoughts had advanced to that point, he had arrived at a conclusion.

Maybe I'm overthinking this, Yang couldn't help wondering. He wasn't really as

full of confidence as others thought he was.

Still, the work he was engaged in was not about the pursuit of truth and humanity. It wasn't about chasing some absolute value. It was win or lose. It was competition. Winning and losing were merely relative terms, so if he got one step ahead of his opponent—if he got one leg up on the enemy—then his job was done. That made it sound like it was easy, but getting a leg up on a genius like Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm was extremely hard business.

For Yang, there was one little thing he regretted.

During the battle at Amritsar last year, Yang had given a combat performance that no one else had been able to match, but he couldn't necessarily say he had done his best in the operations meeting that had come before. Even if it had ended up turning into a wrestling match, shouldn't he have tried to block the irresponsible, aggressive rhetoric of the ultra-hard-liners?

Of course, I'd have just ended up losing even if I had grappled with them, Yang reflected with a grimace.

In any case, a proposal for a prisoner swap had arrived from the empire, and Yang needed to report it to the alliance's capital of Heinessen, the planet named for the nation's founding father. The government would likely accept the proposal gladly. POWs did not enjoy suffrage, but returning soldiers did. That amounted to two million votes plus the votes of their families. An empty but grand celebration would no doubt be held.

"Hey, Julian, it's been a while, but it looks like we might be able to go back to Heinessen."

His voice was cheerful, which Julian felt was a little strange. Heinessen would be full of ceremonies, parties, speeches, and all kinds of things Yang hated.

But now there was a reason that Yang needed to go to Heinessen.

III

The prisoner exchange was not carried out under the auspices of the two governments involved. Both nations held themselves to be humanity's sole legitimate governing authority, and as such did not give official recognition to the other's existence. That being the case, there was no way diplomatic relations could be established.

If such foolish hardheadedness had existed between a pair of individuals, people would probably have laughed at it with scorn. Between two nations, however, people accepted all manner of corruption in the name of dignity and authority.

On February 19 of that year, the prisoner exchange ceremony was carried out at Iserlohn Fortress. Representatives from both militaries came forward, exchanged lists, and signed certificates.

The Galactic Imperial Navy and the Free Planets Alliance Navy, in accordance with the principles of military regulation, do hereby determine to return all captured officers and soldiers to their respective homelands, and upon their honor shall do so.

Imperial Year 488, February 19. Senior Admiral Siegfried Kircheis, Galactic

Space Era 797, February 19. Admiral Yang Wen-li, Free Planets Alliance Navy Representative.

When Yang had finished signing, Kircheis turned toward him with a youthful smile.

“The formalities may be necessary, but at the same time, there’s something rather absurd about them, don’t you think, Admiral Yang?”

“Full agreement.”

Yang observed Kircheis. Yang was young himself, but Kircheis was even younger—still only twenty-one. He was a handsome young man—hair as red as if dyed in dissolved rubies, pleasant-looking blue eyes, unusually tall of stature—and although he was known to be one of the empire’s boldest and most powerful admirals, he seemed to have made a favorable impression on the women of Iserlohn. Yang had engaged him in direct combat at Amritsar, knew that he was the right hand of Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm—and yet even so found the young man difficult to dislike.

It seemed that Kircheis had formed a similar impression of Yang. His handshake as they parted was more than just perfunctory.

Afterward, Julian expressed his impression: “Likable fellow, isn’t he?”

Yang nodded, but when he thought about it, it struck him as odd to feel more favor toward an enemy commander than he did toward the politicians on his own side. Of course, there was nothing unusual about the enemy in front being vastly more forthright than those scheming behind one’s back, and also, it wasn’t as though the present enemy-ally configuration were set in stone for all eternity.

In any case, the welcome ceremony for the returning soldiers had provided Yang with the public excuse he needed to make a temporary return to Heinessen.

IV

Four weeks after departing Iserlohn, Yang and Julian arrived in the capital of Heinessen. Having avoided the central spaceport, which had become murderously choked by two million returning soldiers, the family members come to greet them, and huge throngs of journalists, they arrived by way of Spaceport 3—which exclusively served the local passenger and cargo lines—and immediately headed for the officers’ houses in a driverless taxi. As they were passing by the warehouses and working-class apartments on Hutchison Street, however, they encountered a roadblock. Police officers were sweating hard as they directed large crowds of people. It looked like they were trying to physically do the job of the malfunctioning central control system for ground traffic, but Yang and Julian couldn’t see why the road was closed. Yang got out of the taxi and approached an inexperienced-looking young officer.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Why can’t we go through?”

“It’s nothing. Please don’t come any closer—it’s dangerous.”

Speaking contradictions, the officer pushed Yang back, a tense expression on his face. Yang was in his civilian clothes, and the young officer apparently didn’t recognize who he was. For an instant, Yang felt a slight temptation to reveal his

name and find out what was going on, but in the end he remained silent and went back to the taxi. His disgust for the exercise of privilege outweighed his curiosity.

The matter only became clear after they had made a wide detour and returned to the house on Silver Bridge Street, empty these past four months.

No sooner had they selected the all-news channel on the solivision than that scene came leaping into their living room.

“... At present, the outbreak of crimes committed by returning soldiers is ongoing. Also today, tragedy struck on Hutchison Street, and even now, the situation remains unresolved. At least three have been killed ...”

The expression on the mournful-looking announcer’s face was at odds with the lively cadence of his voice.

Soldiers who used hallucinogens and stimulants to escape from the fear of death on the battlefield would often become addicts and then return to civilian life. One day, they would just explode. Fear and madness became an unseen magma that eventually overflowed, burning up everything around them.

A thought occurred to Yang. He called Julian and had him pull up and forward some materials related to crime statistics from the Data Service. He would have done it himself, except that he didn’t know how to search the databases very well; he wasn’t deliberately trying to push everything off on Julian.

It was just as Yang had expected. Criminal cases were up 65 percent compared to five years ago. On the other hand, arrest rates had fallen by 22 percent. As the ruin of the human heart progressed, the quality of law enforcement declined as well.

Over the course of this long war, there had been millions of fatalities. The military filled the vacancies that were left behind. As a result, human resource shortages had appeared in every field in society. Doctors, educators, police officers, systems administrators, computer technicians ... the numbers of seasoned workers had decreased across the board, their seats either filled by the inexperienced or simply left vacant. In this way, the military’s support structure—society itself—was being weakened. A weak society inevitably weakened the military, and a weakened military again lost soldiers and sought replacements from society ...

One could say that this vicious cycle was an accumulation of contradictions woven together by the spinning wheel that was, in a sense, war. *I’d like to show this to all those prowar cheerleaders who say, “The corruption that comes from peace scares me more than the destruction that comes from war,”* thought Yang. What would they insist they were fighting to protect as they urged on the collapse of society?

What was all this to protect?

Tossing aside the materials he’d obtained, Yang turned over and lay faceup on his sofa. After mulling the question over, he couldn’t help wondering what meaning there was in what he himself was doing. For Yang, it did not fill the heart with cheer to think that it all might be meaningless.

The ceremony was held in the afternoon on the following day and ended with the usual content-free eloquence and hysterical militaristic frenzy.

"I feel like I used up a lifetime's worth of patience in those two hours," Yang grumbled to the waiting Julian when he came out of the auditorium.

He really did hold it in well this time, thought Julian. In the past, Yang had displayed bald-faced antagonism at such ceremonies and had even remained seated when everyone else in the auditorium rose to their feet. This time, he had gone no further than murmuring "What are you even talking about? That's ridiculous!" too low for anyone else to hear.

Yang breathed out a heavy sigh, as if venting poisonous vapors absorbed in the auditorium, and then noticed a group of about one hundred marching down the road ahead. They were wearing long white robes with red fringes and chanting something as they held aloft placards that read THE HOLY LAND, IN OUR HANDS as they walked leisurely along.

"Who are they?" Yang asked a young officer standing next to him.

"Oh, those are followers of the Church of Terra."

"The Church of Terra?"

"You haven't heard? It's a religion that's growing like crazy these days. Its 'object of worship,' if that's the right term ... is Earth itself."

"Earth ... ?"

"Earth, humanity's birthplace, is in a sense the ultimate holy land. Right now, it's under the control of the Galactic Empire. They want to take it back militarily and build a cathedral there to guide the souls of all humanity. To join in a holy war for that purpose, no matter what sacrifices might have to be made ..."

Yang couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"They can't be serious. Something like that is utterly impossible."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Julian said, turning on him with unexpected vehemence. "We have righteousness on our side, and above all, Admiral Yang, we have a great warrior like you, so we *can* destroy the tyrannical Galactic Empire, and we can even recover Earth. Am I wrong?"

"I don't know ..." Yang replied, taking care not to let his ill mood come to the surface. "Nothing's ever that easy, you know."

The seeds of fanaticism existed in every generation. Even so, this latest iteration sounded exceptionally bad.

Earth was indeed mother to the whole human race. However, to put it in extreme terms, it was nothing more than an object of sentimentalism now. Eight centuries ago, Earth had ceased being the center of human society. When a civilization's reach expanded, its center shifted. History had proven this.

Where had they gotten the idea that they could spill the blood of millions just to take back a worn-out old frontier world?

"Now that you mention it," Yang said, "they remind me of another group. What're the Patriotic Knights up to these days?"

"I don't really know, though I hear quite a few of their members have joined

the Church of Terra. At any rate, their ideas mesh rather closely, so it doesn't strike me as unnatural."

"Wonder if they've got the same backer," Yang said, in a voice so low that the officer didn't seem to have heard.

Yang, having decided to rest at home until it was time for the party that evening, got into a driverless cab with Julian and fell into a deep reverie.

Long, long ago, there had been people called crusaders on Earth. They had declared they would take back the Holy Land, and using God's name, invaded other countries—laying their cities to waste, plundering their treasures, and slaughtering their people. Far from feeling shame for those inhuman acts, they had actually prided themselves on their achievements in persecuting unbelievers.

It was a stain on the historical record, brought about by ignorance, fanaticism, self-intoxication, and intolerance, and was bitter proof of the fact that those who believed, without doubting, in God and in justice could become the most brutal, the most violent of all people. Were these Terraists trying to re-create on a galactic scale a folly more than 2,400 years in the past?

There was a proverb that said, "He who works virtue does so in solitude, but he who works folly seeks companions." Grief awaited anyone who followed after such people.

But was this movement to recapture Earth really nothing more than the foolishness it appeared to be on the surface?

Behind the Crusades, there had been seafaring merchants in Venice and Genoa who planned to weaken the influence of the unbelievers and monopolize trade between the East and the West. Ambition backed by cold calculation had been supporting that fanaticism. Supposing that bit of history were to repeat itself as well ...

Could the third power, Phezzan, be behind this?

Yang was stunned at the thought as it came to him in a flash in the back of his mind. In the seat of the narrow taxi, he moved so suddenly that Julian's eyes snapped open wide, and he asked him what was the matter. After giving him a vague answer, Yang sank into thought again.

From Phezzan's standpoint, it would be most welcome for the empire and alliance to reach new levels of mutual hatred and killing in a dispute over Earth. That much he could see. However, if both sides were to fall, and there were a complete collapse of order, wouldn't it be Phezzan—a nation dependent on commerce—that would be most distressed? Unless the activity were limited to a range that could be controlled by Phezzan's will and calculations, fomenting something like this would be meaningless. And it was safe to say that the energy of a fanatical spirit would inevitably break free of control and explode. There was no way that Phezzan didn't know that.

He couldn't believe that they were seriously aiming to recapture Earth militarily and restore its lost glory, but ...

"I just don't understand it," Yang murmured with an unintentional grimace. "What is Phezzan thinking?" Then, amused at himself, he thought ruefully, *I'm worrying too much over nothing—it's hardly certain that Phezzan has anything to do with this Terraism movement at all.*

They arrived back at Yang's official residence, and wanting a drink to help clear his exhaustion, Yang called out to Julian.

“Can you get me a brandy?”

“We’ve got some vegetable juice, but ...”

After a pause, Yang said, “Now listen here, you think inspiration comes from vegetable juice?”

“What matters is how hard you’re trying.”

“Gah! Where’d you pick up an expression like that?”

“Everyone on Iserlohn is my teacher.”

Yang growled as the faces of the venom-tongued Caselnes and von Schönkopf rose up in his mind.

“I should’ve given your boyhood educational environment a little more thought.”

Julian smiled and reminded Yang it was “just one glass” as he brought him his brandy.

V

The party was an improvement, at least when compared to the ceremony that had preceded it.

Although the humorless, rambling speeches from politicians, financiers, and high-ranking bureaucrats continued, there was predictably little hysterical content here.

At Iserlohn as well, parties were held for the purpose of military-civilian relations, but as the one ultimately responsible for them, Yang insisted on doing things in his own personal style. When asked to give a speech, he would say, “Everyone, please enjoy the party,” and with that be done with it. In both the military and the private sector, there were many notable persons who loved giving speeches, but when *Yang* did that, the other dignitaries had no choice but to shorten their speeches as well.

“Admiral Yang’s two-second speech” had become an Iserlohn specialty.

The black-haired admiral, having become a hero of legend while yet young and alive, was even at this party an object of curiosity to certain ladies of celebrity and was forced to use his mouth for purposes other than eating and drinking all evening.

“Admiral Yang, why don’t you wear your medals?”

“Well, those things are heavy, so when I’m wearing them, I end up tilting forward when I walk.”

“Oh my, oh my!”

“My ward tells me I look like an old man walking around with my spine crooked, so ...”

The ladies laughed pleasantly, but the one who was telling them this was not having such a great time. He was merely making a compromise because this was part of what he was paid for.

In a corner of a ballroom spacious to excess, Julian had found himself a seat, and with nothing else to do, was watching the crowd as people walked back and forth. All of the ten thousand in attendance were people of renown, and if it were called a magnificent sight, a magnificent sight was what it was.

The alliance’s head of state, High Council Chairman Trünicht, was there. Renowned as a master of flowery rhetoric, Yang hated the man so deeply that he

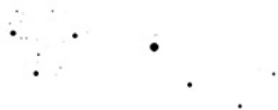
would turn off the solivision whenever he appeared on it. Perhaps wisely, Trünicht seemed to be avoiding Yang as well.

Eventually, Yang slipped out of the ring of ladies and walked quickly toward Julian.

“Julian, I think it’s about time we snuck out of here.”

“Yes, sir, Admiral.”

All of the preparations had been laid out in advance. Julian went to get a bag that had been left with the attendant at the front desk, while Yang went to the bathroom and changed into some nondescript civilian clothes. His dress uniform went into the bag, and then the two of them walked right out of the building, with no one the wiser.



Mikhailov’s Restaurant—though to call it that strained the principle of truth in advertising—was a modest food stall that was open for business all day at the entrance to Courtwell Park, located in a corner of downtown where there were many blue-collar laborers.

Poor couples with little of anything except youth and dreams would come there to buy food and drink, and then sit talking on benches beneath the security light. It was that kind of place.

When things were busy, the hardworking Mikhailov—who even in his military days had been a cook—didn’t pay attention to the faces of each and every customer. So when the peculiar combination of an old man, a young man, and a boy came to his counter—there was also the fact that the lighting was dim—he paid them no mind either.

The three of them ordered fried fish, fried potatoes, quiche, and milk tea, then sat down together, occupying one of the benches fully, and began to eat and drink. It was a three-generation picnic. After all, none of the three had eaten very much at the party ...

“Whew, it’s a pain in the neck to have to sneak off to a place like this just to talk without being seen,” said the eldest of the three.

“I enjoyed myself quite a bit,” said Yang. “Took me back to my days in Officers’ Academy. We’d rack our brains back then coming up with new ways to break curfew.”

If they had realized that the old man was Admiral Bucock, commander in chief of the FPA’s space armada, and the young man was Admiral Yang Wen-li, commander of Iserlohn Fortress, both the proprietor Mikhailov and the other customers would have been speechless. The two military leaders had ducked out of the party separately in order to meet up in this place.

There was something about a light meal of fish and chips that stirred feelings akin to homesickness. In his days at Officers’ Academy, Yang would sometimes slip out of the dormitory with his partner in crime Jean Robert Lappe to sate their adolescent appetites with cheap, delicious food from stalls like this one.

Oh man, I shoulda called it quits after the wine, he’d been thinking. Yang had

ordered schnapps, and no sooner had he stepped out of the bar than he'd taken a hard fall on the sidewalk and found himself unable to move. The proprietor had called Jessica for him, and she had rushed over and dragged him into the back of the bar, so as not to be seen by their stern instructors. She had treated his injuries there.

"Jean Robert Lappe! Yang Wen-li! Wake up! Sit up straight! Who knows what'll happen if we're not back in the dorms by sunrise!"

The coffee that Jessica had brewed for the two hungover youths, in spite of being black, had tasted oddly sweet ...

That same Jean Robert Lappe had been killed in action last year in the Battle of Astarte. Jessica Edwards, who had been engaged to marry him, had since been elected as a delegate for the Planet Terneuzen electoral district and occupied a seat in the National Assembly, where she was now in the vanguard of the antiwar peace faction.

Everything changed. As time continued to march onward, children became adults, adults grew old, and the things that could never be undone only multiplied.

The voice of the old admiral interrupted Yang's reverie.

"Well, nobody is going to recognize us here. Let's hear what you have to say."

"All right, then," Yang said slowly, after washing down his umpteenth fried fish stick with milk tea. "It's possible we just might see a coup d'état in this country before long."

He spoke in a nonchalant tone, but it was enough to bring the old admiral's fingers to a sudden midair halt en route to his mouth.

"A coup?"

"Yeah."

That was the conclusion Yang had reached. He explained plainly, but in great detail, his insight regarding Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm's intentions, as well as the fact that whoever ended up starting it would probably not realize they were being manipulated by Marquis von Lohengramm. Bucock acknowledged his points and nodded.

"I see. Quite logical. But does Marquis von Lohengramm really believe a coup can succeed?"

"Even if it fails, that's fine with him. Because from his standpoint, all that matters is that our military be divided."

"I see." The old admiral crushed his empty paper cup in his hand.

"Still," Yang continued, "Before you can foment a coup, you need to convince the ones doing it that they can succeed. That means coming up with a detailed plan to show them—one that at a glance seems highly doable."

"Hmm."

"A localized rebellion, unless it was quite large-scale and accompanied by a chain reaction affecting other regions, wouldn't have a snowball's chance of shaking the central authorities. The most efficient method would be to seize the capital from within. Especially if they can take the authorities hostage as well."

"That's certainly true."

"But the bottleneck there is that the center of political power is also the center of military power. If an uprising is faced with a stronger, better-organized military force at the moment it breaks out, it's going to fail. Any success it did

have would be short-lived.”

Yang tossed the last hunk of fried potato into his mouth before continuing.

“Which creates a need to organically combine the seizure of the political hub in the capital with localized rebellion.”

Sitting at Yang’s side, Julian’s eyes were gleaming as the young commander’s theory unfolded before him. This was the result of mental wrangling that had gone on in his head for months.

“In short,” said Bucock, “they have to scatter the capital’s military forces. To do that, they’ll sow rebellion on the frontier. There’ll be no choice but to mobilize the military to put it down. But their real aim will be taking the capital while we’re gone. Hmm. If all went well, it’d come off pretty as a picture.”

“As I said before, though, it doesn’t have to succeed as far as Marquis von Lohengramm is concerned. As long as the alliance is filled with division and turmoil—and can’t interfere in the empire’s internal conflict—he will be able to achieve his objectives.”

“He thinks up the most troublesome ideas.”

“For the ones who actually execute them, yes. But it’s not like a lot of labor’s required of the one making them.”

To that indomitable golden-haired youth, Yang figured this kind of thing was nothing more than a game played after meals to help ease his digestion.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me who’s involved in this plot, can you?” said Bucock.

“That’s what you call a no can do.”

“So in short, a coup d’état will probably break out shortly, and you’re saying I have to stop it before it starts.”

“Once it’s broken out, you’ll need a lot of military force and a lot of time to put it down, and that will leave scars. But if you can stop it before it starts, the whole thing can be settled with a single company of MPs.”

“I see. That’s a heavy responsibility.”

“And there’s one other thing I’d like to ask.”

“Yeah?”

Yang unconsciously lowered his voice, drawing the old admiral in.

Seated just a little removed from them, young Julian couldn’t hear what was said. He felt a little disappointed, but if it was something that was all right for him to hear, Yang was sure to tell him eventually. What he had heard thus far was enough by itself to set his heart racing.

“All right,” said Bucock, nodding firmly. “I’ll see that it reaches you before you depart Heinessen. Of course, it’s best if something like that doesn’t come in handy.”

Yang blew into the empty paper bag that the fries had come in, inflating it, and then slapped it with his hand. It burst with a loud pop, startling the people nearby.

“Sorry for all the trouble, but with things as they are, I can’t just carelessly take this to others.”

Yang tossed away the wadded-up paper bag, and a hemispherical robocleaner zoomed off after it, trailing the melody of a song that had been popular twenty years ago. Bucock tossed his bag toward the robocleaner too, rubbed his slightly protruding jaw, and stood up.

“I guess that’s it, then. Let’s leave separately. Take care.”

After the old admiral had disappeared into the city night, Yang and Julian also got up.

A thought suddenly occurred to Julian as he was walking next to Yang toward the taxi stand. Were the people plotting this coup d’état meeting somewhere out of sight right now, discussing their plans in secret?

When Julian mentioned that to Yang, Yang smiled with amusement.

“You bet they are. With better food than we’ve got and a lot more serious looks on their faces.”

VI

It was a windowless, spartan room, devoid of any furnishings expressive of its owner’s personality. The illumination was dimmed to the point that the faces of the ten or so men sitting around the meeting table were indistinct.

“All right, let’s go over it one more time. On April 3 of the standard calendar.”

A red point shone in the lower-right-hand quadrant of the star chart. Soft whispers were exchanged among the men.

“The distance from Heinessen is 1,880 light-years. It’s located in the middle of the Fourth Frontier District and has a spaceport, a supply collection center, and an interstellar transmissions base. April 3, don’t forget. The leader of the uprising in this sector will be Mr. Herbay ...”

The dark silhouette of the man whose name had been spoken nodded slowly.

“The second attack will be on Planet Kaffah, on April 5. That’s 2,092 light-years from Heinessen, located in the Ninth Frontier District ...”

The third attack was to take place on Planet Palmerend, on April 8, and the fourth on Planet Shanpool, on April 10. The man explained how the four uprisings were located at points near the surface of an imaginary sphere with Heinessen as its center, and showed on the star chart how they were all far removed from one another. The government would have to dispatch forces to suppress these rebellions, and each of them lay in entirely different directions.

“This alone will be enough to empty Heinessen of military power. With a small number of troops, we’ll be able to take control of its vital points.”

The High Council, the National Assembly, Joint Operational Headquarters, the Military Transmissions Trafficking Center, and other targets to be occupied were named, and the times for the assaults, the names of the commanders, and the numbers involved were all reiterated. However, these things had already been discussed in meetings more than ten times already, and the attendees were all fully aware of the whole plan and the roles they themselves would play in it.

The attendees shared a common understanding and sense of crisis that if things kept going the way they were, the Free Planets Alliance would be destroyed. Setting aside the scale of the blow suffered last year at the Battle of Amritsar, the rapid advance of political corruption and the weakening of the economy and of society at large was spurring on this sense of crisis.

These problems could under no circumstances be left to the current crop of politicians, who traded in political power like poker players laying down chips. That entire lot needed to be purged.

The man at the head of the table looked around at all of those present. “With

our own hands, we must purify our homeland of this mobocracy that has spat upon our ideals and reached the pinnacle of corruption. This is a just battle, and one we can't avoid in order to renew our nation."

His voice was fully controlled, with something about it that drew a line, distinguishing the speaker from the kind of fanatic merely drunk on himself. To display their confidence in him, all present nodded with equal enthusiasm.

"Now, at present, there's an individual who is going to be a problem."

The man's speech grew more formal, and the other men straightened their posture just a bit.

"That man is Admiral Yang Wen-li, commander of Iserlohn Fortress. It's partly because he hasn't been in the capital that I haven't made him one of our compatriots, but if there are any opinions on the matter ..."

When the man finished speaking, an argument broke out.

"Are we not in a position to win him over? His mind and popularity would prove extremely useful. We can't ignore the strategic value of Iserlohn, either."

"If he did throw in with us, we could take control of all the territory from Heinessen to Iserlohn."

"It's the end of March, and you think we can make time to try to convince him?"

"We don't need to lure a man like that into joining us."

The voice that spoke those words was the youngest of those present, but it was an oddly sullen voice—one lacking in spirit. There was a slight mismatch between the forcefully assertive tone and the voice's quality. Seeing the mood of the other attendees dampened, the man at the head of the table opened his mouth to speak reprovingly.

"It's best not to let your feelings run away with you. However, it's also true that we've no time for trying to win him over. Instead, I'd like to consider this again after the uprising. Taking the astrographical situation into account, it should be Yang who gets tasked with putting down the Shanpool uprising ..."

Even using pulse-warp navigation at maximum combat speed, it would take five days to reach Shanpool from Iserlohn. Even if he departed Shanpool immediately and raced to the capital the moment reports of the coup d'état there reached him, a minimum of twenty-five days would be necessary. Thirty days total. In that span of time, they could gain complete control of the capital, and most importantly, as long as they controlled Artemis's Necklace—a fearsome space defense system consisting of twelve linked combat satellites—taking back Heinessen would be no easy task. Even "Miracle Yang" would be stymied.

"If we can negotiate with Yang under those circumstances, we may be able to convince him more easily than we might otherwise expect. For now, we should act according to plan, and once the seat of power is in our hands, the authority of our new order will be magnified."

"I'd like to make a proposal ..." Just as before, the youthful yet gloomy voice drew all the eyes in the room. "We should send one of our comrades to Iserlohn and have him keep Yang under surveillance. If he starts to take any action that would put us at a disadvantage, he should be eliminated."

There was a moment of silence, after which voices of agreement rose up from several of the figures. Factors that endangered success should be eliminated.

"Those opposed? Very well, then—proposal is adopted. Let's expedite the

selection of our agent.”

However, there was reluctance in the voice of the leader.

A man who was sitting in the corner, not saying a word, let out a heavy sigh. A sigh that reeked of alcohol. A bottle of Rotherham whiskey was in his hand, and its contents had decreased by about half since the meeting began.

His name was Arthur Lynch.

Malicious grumblings came to the surface of Lynch's heart like bubbles in beer. *Dance, dance, dance ... everybody dance like crazy in the palm of fate's hand. Whether you lose your footing and fall along the way, or keep on dancing till the day you die, it's all up to every man's skill.*

Whether he was hoping for the coup's success or its failure was something even Lynch wasn't entirely sure of. He had the feeling that ever since that day nine years ago, not even his own future could be of any interest to him.

Until that day, Lynch's life had never been particularly tragic. He had marked moderate successes in frontline duty and desk work alike, and had made rear admiral right at age forty. People had called him “Excellency.” But then he had made one little misstep. When he had fought the empire in the El Facil system, he had been seized with strange terrors, and after abandoning the civilians in an attempt to flee, he had become a prisoner of the empire. Still alive, he'd become the shame of the navy, and from that day forward had been branded a coward.

Well now, how will things turn out?

Lynch closed his eyes. Beyond a heavy curtain woven of alcohol and ennui, a single planet showed its vague outline.

Back on Odin, capital of the Galactic Empire, separated from this place by ten thousand light-years of empty space, the man who had given him this mission—Reinhard, the young Marquis von Lohengramm—must be gazing into the vast sea of stars, with the keen light of ambition gleaming in his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

IGNITION POINT

It was in November of the prior year that Arthur Lynch had been summoned to appear before Reinhard von Lohengramm, supreme commander of the Galactic Imperial Navy. This was shortly after Reinhard had crushed the Free Planets Alliance's invading military forces in the Amritsar Stellar Region.

Lynch had been living in a correctional block on the empire's frontier ever since his ignominious capture in the El Facil Stellar Region.

POW internment camps as such did not exist within the Galactic Empire. Rather, captured members of "rebel forces" were—for malicious thoughtcrimes against imperial rule—remanded to facilities such as this one, which sought to instill "correct thinking and morals."

Within these vast facilities, the inmates somehow managed to grow just enough food to live on. The imperial military kept their borders under surveillance, and every four weeks delivered clothing and medical supplies. They interfered little in these POW colonies. This did not bespeak the generosity of the imperial military so much as it did its shortages of funding and manpower. Despite the fact that a conscription system was in place, human resources were not infinite, and it was a fact that the military's reach did not extend into every corner of the frontier. The situation was such that whenever these "thought criminals" were kind enough to kill one another in their internal disputes, the military was grateful for the trouble saved.

In the Free Planets Alliance, prisoners from the empire had at first been treated warmly as guests. This had been a sort of psyop, designed to educate them through direct experience about how good a free society could be. After the war had dragged on for a century and a half, however, the FPA could no longer afford to put on airs. Nowadays, those taken captive were treated as something midway between ordinary citizens and prisoners.

Lynch and his old subordinates had been living together in the same colony for some time when word of his ignominious actions at El Facil had spread from the mouths of other soldiers sent to the same correctional block, placing Lynch at the end of cold stares from his fellow inmates.

Unable to defend himself even in the face of the bitterest invective, Lynch had fled to alcohol for escape. He had also learned from newly arrived captives that

his wife had had her name stricken from his family register and had returned to her parents' house with both of the children. As he sank ever deeper into the bottle, he dragged his reputation ever further into the gutter, until even those who had been his direct subordinates had begun to look at him with open hatred and contempt.

Into these circumstances there had appeared a single Imperial Navy destroyer, which had carried him away to the empire's capital of Odin.

Unlike Yang Wen-li, Reinhard von Lohengramm's appearance had been exceptionalism distilled.

His age at that time had been twenty, and in his slender figure could be seen an exquisite balance of grace, strength, and courage. His gently curling, brilliantly golden hair was longer than it had been the previous year and was now worn in a style that resembled a lion's mane. There was not a blemish to be found on his porcelain skin, and there was an exquisite grace to his features. In his person was monopolized all the favor of creation's goddess. Only the flashes of light in his ice-blue eyes made them too sharp, too intense, to liken to an angel's—unless perhaps one meant the eyes of the fallen angel Lucifer, who had longed to surpass God himself.

"Rear Admiral Lynch."

With these words, a single chair had been set out in front of Marquis von Lohengramm's desk, in which the guards had forced their solitary prisoner to sit. Reinhard had been well aware that his voice lacked warmth, yet he had no intention of starting over for the shameless and detestable wretch who sat before him.

After a moment's hesitation, Lynch had said to him, "Who're you?"

"Reinhard von Lohengramm," he had answered.

Lynch's reddish, cloudy eyes had snapped open wide. "Seriously? You look awful ... young, don't you? You know El Facil? How many years ago was it? You must've been just a kid when that happened ... I was a rear admiral ..."

To Reinhard's left, there had stood a tall, redheaded young officer, whose blue eyes had harbored both pity and disgust. "Lord Reinhard, can any man of his ilk really be of use to us?"

"I'll make him useful, Kircheis. Otherwise, his life is worthless." The young, golden-haired marshal had turned his eyes toward Lynch with a gaze that pierced him like a sword of ice.

"Listen well, Mister Lynch—I will not repeat myself. I will delegate a certain mission to you, and I expect you to execute it. Should you succeed, I will grant you the rank of rear admiral in the Imperial Navy."

Lynch's reaction had come slowly but surely. Flames had seemed to blaze up in the backs of his cloudy, bloodshot eyes, and Lynch had shaken his head repeatedly as if driving away the toxic fog of alcohol that lay upon his brain.

"Rear admiral ... ha ha ha ... a rear admiral, is it ... ?" His tongue had emerged to lick his upper and lower lips. "That doesn't sound like a bad deal at all. So what do I do?"

"You infiltrate your homeland, enflame discontented elements within their military, and convince them to stage a coup d'état."

For a long while after, the air had been roiled by the sound of Lynch's unhinged laughter.

“Heh heh heh, that ain’t gonna happen, man. Something like that ... it’s utterly impossible. I mean, you’re sober here, right?”

“It’s possible, and I have the operational plan right here in my hand. Follow it to the letter and you will succeed.”

That dull light had begun to shine again in Lynch’s eyes.

“But ... if that plan were to fail, I’d be a dead man. I would be absolutely, positively dead. They’d kill me ...”

“Then if it comes to that, die!” Reinhard’s voice had split the air like the crack of a whip. “You think your life is worth anything in your present state? You are a coward. You shamelessly fled like a frightened hare, abandoning both the civilians you were to protect and the men you were to lead. There’s not a man alive who would plead on your behalf. Yet even so, you still cling to life above all else?”

His voice overpowered Lynch’s dulled, alcohol-ravaged spirit, stirring something in the man. The quality and quantity of Lynch’s mental energy was nothing compared to Reinhard’s. As he had sat there, his whole body had begun to tremble, and drops of sweat had even begun to roll off of his body.

“It’s true. I’m a coward,” he had murmured in a weak but distinct voice. “It’s too late now to ever salvage my name. So why not just take it all the way? The cowardice, the shamelessness ... ?”

He had lifted up his face. The cloudiness in his eyes had not dispersed, but already there writhed in them flames like those of a smelting furnace.

“All right, I’ll do it. The rear admiralship’s a sure thing, right?”

In that voice had been the faintest trace of the spirit he had possessed more than a decade ago.

II

After Lynch had departed, Reinhard had looked up at his redheaded friend. “If this succeeds, Yang will be far too busy with domestic concerns to interfere with us here.”

“I agree ... and with their domestic peace disrupted, the rebel military as well will abandon any plans they might have made against us.”

“Peace. You know what peace is, Kircheis?” Reinhard’s tongue had dripped acid. “It refers to a blessed age when incompetence is not held to be the greatest vice. Just look at those aristocrats.”

The empire was, on its surface, in an ongoing state of war with the Free Planets Alliance, yet in the midst of all that, those who held rank within the aristocracy were alone enjoying “peace within the fortress walls.” While in the blackest void thousands of light-years away wounded soldiers fell trembling with the fear of death, decadent balls were being held under the crystal chandeliers of the royal palace—with the finest champagne, with roast venison steeped in red wine, with chocolate bavarois ... There were Persian cats of purest white, blue pearl hairpins, amber wall ornaments, vases of white porcelain handed down through the centuries, black sable furs, long dresses adorned with splashes of countless gemstones, stained glass windows rich in color and light ...

Is this ... this tragically absurd disparity the true reality?

That was what a boy with ice-blue eyes had thought the first time he had

appeared at a ball.

Yes, he had thought. *This is reality.*

So reality must be changed.

Those thoughts had developed quickly into firm conviction, and ever since, ballrooms and parties had to him been places for observing the enemies whom he must someday destroy. After many a night of such observations, Reinhard had arrived at a conclusion: there was no one he need fear among these highborn in their showy costumes.

That opinion he had revealed to Kircheis and no other.

“I don’t believe we need fear any *noble*, either,” Kircheis had replied. It was around this time that Kircheis began to assume a more humble demeanor toward Reinhard. “But we should be wary of the *nobility*.”

At those words, Reinhard had stared at his friend in surprise.

The unified will of a group—even when it amounted to nothing more than a collection of personal grudges against a common foe—was nothing to take lightly. While crossing swords with the enemy in front of you, someone else just might stick a dagger in your back.

“Oh,” Reinhard had said. “In that case, I’ll be on my guard.”

That sharp-edged part of his soul—which like the blade of a narrow sword was too sharp for its own good—was kept sheathed and restrained by his dear friend.

One other had long smoothed his sharper edges and cooled the raging emotions inside him: his elder sister by five years, Annerose.

Locked away at age fifteen in the inner palace of prior emperor Freidrich IV, she had seemed at that time to have relinquished all future prospects of her own. Dubbed Gräfin—or Countess—von Grünewald by the emperor, she had taken Reinhard in from the unstable husk of their father and provided backing and support for Kircheis, the boy who was like a brother to him, becoming primary benefactress to them both.

Now her former dependents, having greatly surpassed her in stature, wore titles of admiralty and went racing through the war zones of the galaxy. Yet whenever they appeared before her, the pair could revert in no time at all to the days of their boyhood—to those bright, shining days of long ago, suffused with sweet, clear light.

Ever since previous emperor Friedrich IV’s utterly disarrayed life had come to a sudden end, the Galactic Empire’s governing authorities had been visited by the political equivalent of intermittent geological upheavals.

First, the five-year-old child Erwin Josef had become the new emperor. Although he was the grandchild of the late Friedrich IV, his succession had invited the anger and jealousy of two highborn aristocrats—Duke Otto von Braunschweig and Marquis Wilhem von Littenheim. Both were married to daughters of the late Friedrich IV, and their wives had both given birth to daughters of their own. These men harbored ambitions of making their own daughters empress and of ruling the empire themselves as regent.

With the crumbling of those ambitions, they had joined hands against their common enemies and vowed revenge. Those enemies were the child emperor Erwin Josef II and the two powerful vassals who supported him—the seventy-six-year-old acting imperial prime minister, Duke Klaus Lichtenlade, and a twenty-year-old marquis named Reinhard von Lohengramm.

In this way, the splitting of the Galactic Empire's ruling class into two factions became unavoidable. There was the emperor's faction, the Lichtenlade-Lohengramm axis, and the anti-emperor faction, the Braunschweig-Littenheim confederation.

Many concerned for the empire's future, or for their own personal security, sought to remain neutral, but the worsening tensions would not allow them to just sit on the sidelines indefinitely.

Which side should I ally myself with if I want to live? Which side is the right one to follow as a subject of the empire, and has a chance of winning? In these matters, their judgment and insight came to be tested.

Emotions leaned from the start toward von Braunschweig and von Littenheim, but it was widely known that Reinhard was a military genius. Unable to easily decide, they were caught in the vale between their hearts and their heads, desperately trying to guess which way the winds would blow.

"The nobles are all running about like mice, racking their brains over which side will be more advantageous to align with. It's made for great comedy of late."

The one to whom Reinhard made that remark one day was the Imperial Space Armada chief of staff, Vice Admiral Paul von Oberstein.

"Unless it comes to a happy ending, it can't really be called comedy."

Von Oberstein was a man utterly devoid of frivolity, so he was widely believed to lack a sense of humor altogether. Although still in his midthirties, half his hair had already gone white, and cold light brimmed in his artificial eyes, which housed internal photon computers. His lips were thin and tightly drawn, and his facial expressions contained nothing whatsoever that could be called endearing. The man himself also feigned ignorance of his reputation, no matter what might be said of him.

"In any case, Your Excellency should remain patient while watching your enemies squirm, of course."

"Certainly. I'll take my own good time."

Reinhard, of course, wasn't just passively waiting. Employing a host of clever tactics, he had incited the highborn nobles to blind wrath while they still hadn't a prayer of victory. Their hysterical explosions of outrage were exactly what Reinhard wanted. Their own plots against him he swatted aside with the purehearted passion of a young boy chasing beautiful butterflies.

"There's really no need to drive the nobles into a corner," Reinhard said, as his supple fingertips toyed with his friend's red hair. "It's enough just to make them think they're going to be cornered."

In point of fact, the wealth and military power of the nobility would have far outstripped that of Reinhard alone had they stood united against him. Nevertheless, the responses of those harried nobles—*At this rate, we'll be destroyed! We've got to fight back somehow!*—were lacking in reason and seemed to Reinhard simply absurd.

Reinhard's mind was no longer that of a boy, but something of boyhood yet remained in his heart. Those who opposed him he hated with earnest, yet whenever he noticed some unique quality in the words or deeds of his opponents—even if it were a quality that could hardly be called attractive—it would arouse in him a certain curiosity. At present, however, he could see no such qualities among the aristocrats, and in that, he felt just slightly disappointed.

III

Count Franz von Mariendorf, a mild-mannered and conscientious man, enjoyed the confidence of not only the aristocrats but his own people as well.

Undecided as to how best to deal with present circumstances, he was feeling every day like holding his head in his hands. He wanted to maintain neutrality if at all possible, but was that going to be an option?

It was on one such day that his eldest daughter Hilda made a brief return home from university on Odin.

Hilda—the count's daughter Hildegard von Mariendorf—had only just turned twenty.

Her darkly shaded blond hair was cut short for ease of movement. There was a hard sort of beauty to her features, yet she didn't give a cold or harsh impression, a fact likely due to the lively sparkle in her blue-green eyes. Those eyes were practically bursting with life and vibrant intellect, giving more the impression of an adventurous young boy.

An old man with shiny pink cheeks met her in the mansion's hall and bent his corpulent body forward in a bow.

"Milady, it's so good to see that you're well."

"You're looking well yourself, Hans. Where's father?"

"He's in the sunroom. Shall I go and tell him you're here?"

"No need—I'll go myself. Oh, can you bring coffee, please?"

Aside from a pink scarf tied around her collar, the count's daughter was attired no differently from a man, and she walked through the hallway with a rhythmic step.

A pair of sofas had been placed by the wide sunroom's window, and there in the sunlight, Count von Mariendorf sat with his back hunched forward, lost in thought. Looking up at the sound of his daughter's voice, he forced a smile and beckoned her near.

"What were you thinking of just now, Father?"

"Oh, ah, nothing of any great import."

"That's reassuring—to say the fate of the Galactic Empire and the future of House Mariendorf are of no great import."

Count Franz von Mariendorf gave a great involuntary shudder.

His face went rigid, and he looked toward his daughter. With an expression that was impish—but not *merely* impish—Hilda returned her father's gaze.

Hans the butler came round with a coffee set on a silver tray. A long silence stretched out until he withdrew; it was the daughter who broke it.

"So then, have you decided what you're going to do, Father?"

"I am hoping to remain neutral. However, should I be left with no choice but to take one side or the other, I will support von Braunschweig. As a nobleman of the empire, that is my—"

"Father!"

With a sharp cry and a harsh look, the daughter had cut off her father's words.

Hilda's father stared in surprise at his daughter. Her blue-green eyes shone intensely. They harbored a strange beauty, like flames that danced within jewels.

"There is a fact from which most of the aristocracy is averting its eyes. It is that

as surely as every human born will someday die, death comes for nations as well. There hasn't been a single nation to escape ultimate destruction since civilization first emerged on an itty-bitty planet called Earth. How can the Galactic Empire—the Goldenbaum Dynasty—alone be an exception to that?"

"Hilda! Stop it, Hilda!"

"The Goldenbaum Dynasty survived nearly five hundred years," said the count's bold daughter. "They ruled the entire human race for more than two hundred of those years, doing whatever they pleased with their wealth and power. They killed people, they stole the daughters of other houses, they created laws for their own convenience ..."

She was all but pounding the table in her fervor.

"They've done however they pleased for so long. If the curtain were to finally fall, who could you blame? Then again, it's only natural to be grateful for five hundred years of continued prosperity. But even the laws of nature say that it can't go on forever."

It was a lambasting worthy of a revolutionary, and her mild-mannered father was at first left speechless. At last, however, he gathered up spirit enough for a counterattack.

"Even so, Hilda, that doesn't mean there's any reason to throw in with Marquis von Lohengramm."

"Oh, but there is a reason."

"What kind of reason?" His voice was filled with doubt when he asked that question, and at the same time contained a hint of pleading.

"There are four reasons. Will you hear me out?"

Her father nodded. His daughter's explanation was as follows:

First: Marquis von Lohengramm had sided with the new emperor, and by order of that emperor, had just cause to subdue those who opposed him. Compared with that, the Braunschweig-Littenheim camp was preparing to wage nothing more than a private war of naked ambition.

Second: The military power of Duke von Braunschweig and the others was great, and sooner or later most of the aristocrats would consolidate behind it. Therefore, even if House Mariendorf participated, it would not be viewed as a particularly important ally and would receive no special treatment. The Lohengramm camp, on the other hand, was the weaker force, and if House Mariendorf aligned with it, its forces would not only be strengthened, there would also be a political impact—which meant it was certain that House Mariendorf would receive a warm welcome.

Third: Duke von Braunschweig and Marquis von Littenheim were only joining forces for the time being; they lacked the will to cooperate over the long term. Most importantly, the chain of command in their military forces was not unified, and that could be fatal. On the other hand, the Lohengramm camp was operating with both purpose and a unified command structure. Regardless of what might happen en route to the finale, it was self-evident who would come out on top in the end.

Fourth: Neither Reinhard von Lohengramm nor any of his chief subordinates were of highborn lineage, and he was thus very popular among the common class. It was impossible to fight a war with only officers, and the ordinary soldiers of both camps were all commoners. Among the rank-and-file soldiers of the Duke

von Braunschweig camp, riots and mutinies had broken out as a result of accumulated hostility toward officers of high birth. There was even the danger of collapse from within ...

“What do you think, Father?”

After Hilda had thus concluded, Count von Mariendorf remained silent, simply wiping his brow. He couldn’t argue with his daughter’s logic.

“I believe House Mariendorf should align with the winner—that is to say, with Marquis von Lohengramm. As proof of our loyalty, we should also offer him land and a hostage.”

“Land is not a problem—by all means, give him some. But I won’t furnish hostages. That’s out of the—”

“Not even if the hostage wishes it?”

“But who would ever—”

In midsentence, a fearful look appeared on Count von Mariendorf’s face. “No, not you ...”

“Yes. I’ll go.”

“Hilda!” her father gasped, but she just kept calmly adding sugar and cream to her coffee. She was confident her body was not predisposed toward weight gain.

“I’m grateful to you, Father. You brought me into the world on the eve of some very interesting times.”

Count von Mariendorf looked on in stunned silence.

“I can’t propel history by myself, but I can observe with my own eyes how history moves and how the people caught up in it live and die.”

After drinking her coffee, Hilda stood and hugged her father’s head, rubbing her cheek against his brown, lusterless hair.

“Don’t worry about me, Father. Come what may, I’m going to protect House Mariendorf. No matter what I have to do.”

“Then I leave it in your hands.” Calm was starting to return to the elder von Mariendorf’s voice. “Whatever the end result, I’ll have no regrets. But you need not sacrifice yourself for the sake of House Mariendorf. Instead, think on how you can use House Mariendorf as a tool, to open up a path for your own survival. Will you do that?”

“Father ...”

“Take good care of yourself.”

She tilted her head and kissed her father’s brow. Then, like a butterfly, she turned and left the sunroom.

IV

After a six-day journey, Hilda arrived on Odin. Or, from her perspective, she returned. She had been living on Odin for a full four years now.

Hilda took a robocar from the spaceport to the Lohengramm admirality. Perhaps because she was in such elevated spirits, she felt no fatigue whatsoever. In any case, once this was over she could rest as much as she pleased.

“Do you have an appointment, *fräulein*?” asked the boyish-looking young officer at the window. He wore a name tag that read **LIEUTENANT VON RÜCKE**.

“I’m afraid I don’t. But this concerns the lives and the hopes of a great many people. I’m certain that His Excellency the marshal will consent to see me, so

could I please ask you to announce me?"

At the sight of the beautiful young woman's earnest expression—about 30 percent of which was an act—Lieutenant von Rücke seemed overcome with chivalrous spirit. He had her wait briefly in the lobby, but after making several calls, he at last beamed at her, as though he were the one whose request had been granted.

"He says that he'll see you. Please take elevator 4 up to the tenth floor."

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry to have put you to such trouble," Hilda said with complete sincerity, and boarded an elevator that doubled as a weapons detection system.

That day, Reinhard was awaiting the arrival of a particular report, but it didn't seem to be forthcoming, and he took interest at the news that a lovely young woman was here to see him. For Reinhard, of course, beautiful women were not to be prized too highly. Even so, the sight of Hilda's beauty—raw and natural, no noticeable makeup—left him just a little impressed at how unlike an aristocrat's daughter she appeared.

"It's a pity Kircheis isn't with us today," Reinhard said once they were seated in the reception room. "Did you know he has a bit of a history with the von Mariendorfs?"

"Yes, of course. He saved my father's life during the Kastropf Rebellion last year. I've never met him in person, though."

After a moment's silence, Reinhard said, "So then, you say you have business with me today?"

Coffee was brought in by a young boy who looked like a cadet from a military preparatory school. Reinhard was picking up the jar of cream when Hilda spoke.

"On the occasion of the coming civil war, House Mariendorf will side with you, Marquis von Lohengramm."

For a split second, Reinhard's hand froze, but then he completed the operation in a series of offhanded motions.

"Civil war, you say?"

"The one against Duke von Braunschweig, which could break out tomorrow for all we know."

"You're a bold one, aren't you? Supposing such a thing were to happen, my victory would hardly be assured. Yet even so, you say you'd support me?"

Hilda steadied her breathing and related to the young imperial marshal the points she had explained to her father. Reinhard's ice-blue eyes shone.

"You have remarkable insight," he said. "Very well. If that's how things stand, I could use an ally. Your consideration will certainly be rewarded. I promise to take good care of House Mariendorf—naturally—as well as any other houses with whom you might put in a word for me."

"Your generous words will make it easier to persuade our acquaintances and relations—as well as ourselves, milord."

"What's that? You've only just become my ally. I couldn't possibly treat you with discourtesy. Repaying your efforts and courage is only the natural thing to do. If there's any way I can be of assistance to you, please don't hesitate to ask."

"In that case, then, if I may avail myself of your kind words, I do have one request."

"Certainly," said Reinhard. "Go ahead."

"In recognition of our loyalty ... I would like an official document of guaranty, recognizing House Mariendorf and guaranteeing its lands and titles."

"Oh? An official document?"

A certain wariness had crept into Reinhard's tone. He looked at Hilda with a gaze slightly different from the one he had regarded her with up until now. Count von Mariendorf's daughter gazed fearlessly back at the young lord.

Reinhard thought it over for a moment, but it didn't take him long to reach a decision.

"Very well. I'll put it in writing and get it to you by the end of the day."

"You have my utmost gratitude." Respectfully, Hilda bowed her head. "House Mariendorf swears to Your Excellency our absolute loyalty and shall endeavor to be of service to you in matters great and small."

"I'll be counting on you, then. And Fraülein von Mariendorf?"

"Yes?"

"Will such documents of guaranty be necessary for any other houses you may persuade to join us?"

"I would ask that you give them to those who request them of their own accord. For those who do not, I see no need."

Hilda's words rolled off her tongue without the slightest hesitation.

"Well, well ..." Reinhard said, smiling.

Reinhard's intention was to thoroughly purge the empire of the old system that served as the Goldenbaum Dynasty's support structure. For five centuries now, the aristocrats had engorged themselves on privilege, and Reinhard had no intention whatsoever of allowing them to survive into the new regime.

Once his power was absolute, he intended to eliminate all but the most useful of them, or cast them to the multitudes, perhaps, should the people cry out for blood. *Let them perish who lack the ability to survive*—that had been the belief of Rudolf, whom their ancestors had served. And now on the present generation would the sins of the fathers be visited.

Hilda had seen what was coming and had come to Reinhard seeking an official guaranty written in his own hand. Unlike a spoken promise, one that was set in writing could not easily be broken. Not only would doing so leave a blemish on Reinhard's honor, it would invite distrust of his own system of authority.

Having taken such a measure on her own family's behalf, Hilda was saying, "As for the other aristocrats, slay and spare, bestow and confiscate at your own good pleasure." She wasn't speaking from a merely self-centered position, though—saying, "If it's well with me and mine, then to blazes with the rest"—she was in effect declaring that she would not align laterally with the old aristocratic families.

The young lady's political and diplomatic instincts were incisive—frighteningly so.

From among the empire's thousands of aristocratic families, a praiseworthy talent had at last appeared—at the tender age of twenty, and a woman, no less. Of course, Reinhard himself was only one year older than she.

It's a sign of the times, Reinhard thought. The era of rule by the aged was coming to an end. And not just in the empire. In the Free Planets Alliance, Admiral Yang had only just turned thirty, while Landesherr Rubinsky of Phezzan was still in his forties.

Even so, this young woman ...

Reinhard stared at Hilda again and started to say something.

Just then, however, there was a commotion outside the door that he barely had time to register before a high-ranking officer burst inside, face flushed with excitement. His hulking frame was so large that he could block the entrance all by himself.

“Excellency! The malcontent nobles have finally started to move!”

His loud voice was a match for his build.

Karl Gustav Kempf, one of the admirals attached to Reinhard’s admirality as well as a former ace fighter pilot, was well-known these days as a daring and fearless commanding officer.

Reinhard rose to his feet. This was the news he had been waiting for. Hilda’s eyes opened wide in spite of herself—his movements had been startlingly lithe and graceful.

“Fraülein von Mariendorf, I’ve enjoyed the chance to make your acquaintance today. I’d like to have dinner with you sometime.”

As Kempf was following Reinhard out of the room, he seemed for just an instant to turn a curious glance toward Hilda.

V

The nobles opposing the Lohengramm-Lichtenlade axis had gathered on Odin at Duke von Braunschweig’s villa in Lippstadt Forest. Officially, they had come to attend an auction of paintings by ancient masters, with a garden party to follow. In an underground hall, however, signatures had been collected in a “Roll of Patriots” opposing the tyranny of Marquis von Lohengramm and Duke Lichtenlade.

This was referred to generally as the Lippstadt Agreement, and the aristocratic military organization to which it gave birth was called the Lippstadt Coalition of Lords.

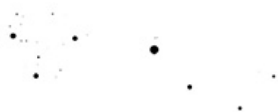
In total, 3,740 nobles participated. The combined strength of their regular and private armies numbered 25,600,000.

The coalition leader was Duke Otto von Braunschweig. The vice coalition leader was Marquis Wilhelm von Littenheim.

The roll that contained nearly four thousand aristocratic names also leveled blistering criticism at Duke Lichtenlade and Marquis von Lohengramm, and in grand and exalted language declared that the sacred duty of protecting the Goldenbaum Dynasty had been given to “the chosen ones” of the traditional aristocratic class.

“The divine patronage of great Lord Odin is upon us all, and of righteousness’s triumph there can be no doubt.”

Those were the words with which the statement was concluded.



"I wonder, could great Lord Odin really be their patron?"

After listening to Kempf's report, Reinhard uttered those words with a heaping spoonful of sarcasm and looked around at the faces of subordinates who had gathered in the meeting room.

Siegfried Kircheis was present. Von Oberstein was present. The other admirals in attendance as well were all talented commanders, the cream of the armed forces' crop.

"If they go crying to the gods for help at the outset, even Lord Odin will curl his lip in disgust. It might be different if they offered him a beautiful virgin sacrifice, but knowing Duke von Braunschweig, he might just take her for himself."

Mittermeier, von Reuentahl, and Wittenfeld raised their voices in laughter.

Wolfgang Mittermeier's build was a little on the small side, but with his firm, well-proportioned physique, he certainly looked sharp and agile. He had tousled blond hair the color of honey, and lively gray eyes. When it came to high-speed tactical maneuvers, he had no peer. At the Battle of Amritsar last year, he had pursued an enemy fleet that had taken flight and moved so swiftly that his own fleet's vanguard had gotten mixed up in the tail of the fleeing enemy formation. Since that time, he had been honored with a nickname: Wolf der Sturm—"the Gale Wolf."

Oskar von Reuentahl was a tall man, with brown hair so dark it was nearly black. He was quite handsome, but what always took people aback was his eyes. Thanks to a genetic fluke called heterochromia, his right eye was brown, and his left eye was blue. He had performed many daring feats, both at Amritsar and in other battles besides, and was highly regarded for his skill as an operations commander.

Fritz Josef Wittenfeld had somewhat longer reddish-orange hair and pale brown eyes. Some likely felt that something was slightly off in the contrast of his narrow face and powerful build. As a tactician, he was a bit lacking in flexibility, which had worked to the detriment of his comrades at Amritsar.

In addition to these, Reinhard's top executives included Admirals Kornelias Lutz, August Samuel Wahlen, Ernest Mecklinger, Neidhart Müller, and Ulrich Kessler. Each was unique in his own way, and all of them were young. Together, they formed Reinhard's most prized asset.

Speaking of assets, there were whispers lately of an impending financial crisis due to the prolonged war and the chaos at court. But when Reinhard said, "The fiscal crisis will be resolved in one fell swoop," he wasn't simply shooting off his mouth irresponsibly. The imperial family's assets aside, there remained a vast source of untapped revenue: the assets of the nobles.

Naturally, he would confiscate every last thing that Duke von Braunschweig and Marquis von Littenheim owned; nor would he spare those who had joined themselves to their cause. And once he applied a regime of inheritance taxes, fixed asset taxes, and progressive taxation to those nobles who remained, the treasury would overflow with monies easily exceeding ten trillion reichsmark. The trial calculations had been completed already.

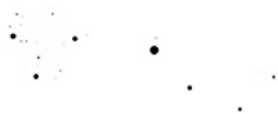
There would be a political necessity for gentler treatment of those nobles who sided with him, so from that perspective, the more nobles who made him their enemy, the better.

Squeezing the nobles dry would do more than simply meet the empire's fiscal necessities. The common class had amassed a five-century store of anger and hostility toward those who lived immersed in extravagant lifestyles and held vast fortunes on which they paid no taxes.

Reinhard had to calm that anger, and he had to use it as well.

Certainly, he had a desire to reform politics and society. But for Reinhard, that had to come with the side benefit of the Goldenbaum Dynasty's overthrow. This would all be for nothing if political and societal reform breathed new life into the Goldenbaum Dynasty.

The Goldenbaum Dynasty that Rudolf founded must end in bloodshed and devouring flames of judgment. That was the sacred oath he had taken as a young boy, the day his beloved sister Annerose had been stolen away by a hideous old ruler. It was also a vow that Siegfried Kircheis shared.



Eugen Richter and Karl Bracke were regarded as leaders of the group known alternately as the Reform Faction and the Civilization and Enlightenment Faction. One way they showed the posture they had assumed was by voluntarily omitting the *von* from their names, in spite of their noble birth.

It had been right at the beginning of March that they were summoned by Reinhard and ordered to draw up an extremely forward-looking document called the Societal and Economic Reconstruction Plan. About a month had passed since the Lippstadt Agreement had been signed.

When they left Reinhard's presence, they couldn't help looking at one another.

"I can read what Marquis von Lohengramm has in mind. He intends to cast himself as a reformer to win the support of the people. That will be a powerful weapon when competing with the highborn."

Bracke nodded at Richter's words.

"Meaning that he's using us to further his ambition. I can't say I like it. There's no way to say no, but what if we pretended to go along with this and then sabotaged him?"

"Now, hold on a minute. Even if we are being used right now, I'm not sure I really mind it. If the reforms we've been hoping for all this time are finally implemented, isn't that a good thing, regardless of whose name it's done in?"

"Well, that's true, but ..."

"Viewed another way, there's also a sense in which we're using Marquis von Lohengramm. We may have ideals and policies, but we don't have the authority and military force to implement them. Marquis von Lohengramm does. At the very least, he'd be vastly better than a reactionary leader like Duke von Braunschweig. Am I wrong, Karl?"

"No, you're definitely correct about that. It's clear that if Duke von Braunschweig and his ilk get the reins of power, they'll take the government and society in a reactionary direction."

Richter gave Bracke a pat on the shoulder.

“In short, we and Marquis von Lohengramm need each other. With that understanding, we should cooperate when we’re able to and do whatever we can to steer society in a better direction, no matter how small the effect may be.”

Bracke tilted his head at Richter’s words. “But once he gets his hands on absolute power, Marquis von Lohengramm won’t necessarily continue taking a civilized, enlightened attitude. There’s no guarantee he won’t turn into a despotic dictator overnight.”

Richter nodded slowly. “That’s exactly right. And it’s against that very day that we have to drive these reforms home now. We have to cultivate a citizenry equipped to criticize and resist starting on the day that Marquis von Lohengramm abandons his posture as a reformer.”

VI

The need to organize their disparate military forces loomed over the heads of the nobles who had signed the Lippstadt Agreement. This was because a unified command headquarters, a unified strategy, and a unified leadership and supply system were going to be essential if they hoped to counter Reinhard’s genius.

In order of priority, the first thing to do was to decide on who would be the supreme commander of the combat units. The composition and positioning of those units would depend on his thinking and planning.

At first, Duke von Braunschweig intended to assume full command of combat operations himself, but Marquis von Littenheim argued that this chair should be filled by a professional tactician.

“We should make Admiral Merkatz the commander in chief. He has an excellent record, and he’s well respected. Besides, what kind of leader would go to the front lines in person?”

Although it was obvious that Marquis von Littenheim’s true intent was to stop Duke von Braunschweig from scoring any military accomplishments, the argument itself was sound as could be and thus could not be deflected.

“Well, if it’s Admiral Merkatz, I suppose I could live with that.”

Finding the other aristocrats in agreement, Duke von Braunschweig had to keep his internal tsking to himself and show himself a man of broad mind and generous disposition. Extending all courtesies, he invited Merkatz to his villa and earnestly entreated him to become commander in chief of the coalition forces.

Senior Admiral Wiliabard Joachim Merkatz, a seasoned warrior of fifty-nine, had a brilliant service record and reliably impeccable strategic thinking. In the battle for the Astarte Stellar Region, he had fought alongside Reinhard against the fleets of the Free Planets Alliance. He was known as one of the first to recognize the genius of the man.

Merkatz did not accept Duke von Braunschweig’s request easily.

He was fundamentally opposed to this meaningless war and had been trying to preserve his neutrality when the clash became inevitable.

Merkatz refused, but Duke von Braunschweig would not take no for an answer. For von Braunschweig to be refused after negotiating in person would have left a stain on his authority as coalition leader.

Preaching true loyalty to the empire and to the imperial family, the duke continued to try to persuade him. Gradually, shades of implied threat began to

creep into his words, and when their scope came to encompass the safety of his family, Merkatz at last relented.

“In that case, I accept, humble of talent though I may be. However, there are two points on which I want the aristocrats’ agreement in advance. Namely, that they yield all authority to me in matters relating to combat, and that the chain of command be unified. Accordingly, they will obey my orders, no matter how high their position or status may be, and be punished according to military regulations in the event of insubordination. I must have agreement on these points.”

“Very well. Consider them accepted.”

Duke von Braunschweig nodded and soon held a banquet to entertain his new commander in chief.

After this party had wound down, Merkatz, the guest of honor, returned to his office late that night. His aide—a lieutenant commander with dull blond hair named Bernhard von Schneider—thought it odd to see Merkatz looking so clearly heavy of heart.

“Your Excellency, you’ve become commander in chief of the coalition forces, and their leaders have agreed to both of your demands. Maybe it’s just me, but isn’t it a warrior’s dream to lead a large fleet into battle against a powerful enemy? Why do you look so gloomy?”

Merkatz made a sad sort of laugh.

“Von Schneider, you’re still young. Duke von Braunschweig and the rest have indeed swallowed the conditions I set forth. Unfortunately, though, that’s only lip service. They’ll be interfering with operations somehow or other in no time. And even if I do attempt to try them by military law, they won’t just sit quietly and submit themselves to it. It won’t be long before they hate me even more than Reinhard von Lohengramm.”

“Surely not ...”

“Privilege is the worst of poisons. It rots the soul. The highborn have been steeped in it for dozens of generations. It’s become second nature for them to justify themselves and shift blame to someone else. I speak like this now, but I was born an aristocrat myself—at the bottom of the hierarchy, mind you—and I didn’t realize any of that until I started working with low-ranking soldiers in the navy. I just hope these nobles can come to understand *before* they find Marquis von Lohengramm’s sword hanging in the air above their heads.”

After sending away the faithful young officer with the dull blond hair, Merkatz turned to his desk and, with clumsy motions, set to work at his word processor. He was writing a letter to his family.

It was a letter of farewell.

VII

There were those among Duke von Braunschweig’s subordinates who sought to avert the clash between the pro- and anti-Reinhard factions. This was not because they held to a position of absolute pacifism but because they saw no hope of victory if they did fight with Reinhard.

Commodore Arthur von Streit was the most prominent of these. He sought a meeting with Duke von Braunschweig and, accepting on himself a temporary notoriety, argued that Reinhard should be assassinated in order to avoid war.

The duke swatted aside the proposal with a single word.

“Ridiculous.”

“But, Excellency ...”

“I’ve assembled an army of several million, and I intend to face that golden brat head-on and crush him. That’s what will show Marquis von Littenheim—and the whole of the empire—my justice and my abilities. Will you assassinate that? Do you wish to drag my honor through the mud so badly?”

“Excellency, it pains me to say this, but Marquis von Lohengramm is a tactical genius. Even if we fight and win, the casualties will be astronomical, the flames of war will engulf the whole empire, and harm will come as well to the people. Please, I beg you to reconsider.”

Von Streit’s earnest plea was rewarded with angry shouts. “*Even if we win?*” What’s that supposed to mean! I’ve no need of men who lack faith in our certain victory—if your life means that much to you, go hunker down on some frontier world and grow vegetables or something!”

After von Streit retreated in dismay, a captain by the name of Anton Ferner offered his opinion to Duke von Braunschweig. His argument as well was for a small-scale campaign of terrorism, and he held forth passionately as he tried to convince his lord.

“There’s no need for a force of millions. Just lend me three hundred soldiers trained in covert operations, and you’ll be able to watch it yourself when Marquis von Lohengramm breathes his last.”

“Silence. Do you also mean to tell me I can’t beat that golden brat?”

“Excellency, what I want to say is that if this turns into a major war that splits the empire in half, the catastrophe will simply be too great, and the victor will without a doubt come out hurting as well. Marquis von Lohengramm aims to build anew in the wake of the destruction, so he is willing. But, Excellency, in your position, you have an obligation to preserve the system. For you, it isn’t enough to merely win.”

“Do not speak to me with such insolence!”

Showered with many angry roars, Ferner withdrew from before von Braunschweig, but that didn’t mean he had abandoned his beliefs. He despised his master’s obstinacy and roundabout ways, but like von Streit, he didn’t simply hunker down and leave it at that.

“With things the way they are, I’ll just have to do it myself. Even if I can’t kill Marquis von Lohengramm, there’s still the option of taking his sister, the Countess von Grünewald, hostage.”

He gathered firearms and a group of three hundred soldiers consisting mainly of his immediate subordinates, and then one night, unbeknownst to his master, he attempted to stage an assault on Reinhard’s residence.

It ended in failure, however. The Schwarzen estate where Reinhard and Annerose lived was already under the careful guard of five thousand armed troops led by Kircheis himself. There was no opening for a surprise attack whatsoever.

“I should’ve expected as much of Marquis von Lohengramm and that right-hand man of his. Guess they’re not the sort who’d fall for cheap tricks from the likes of me.”

Having given up on the idea, Ferner disbanded his team on the spot and went

into hiding himself. It was certain he had incurred the wrath of Duke von Braunschweig, having mobilized troops without permission.

Duke von Braunschweig, upon learning what had transpired directly from the mouths of soldiers returning empty-handed, was indeed furious and had his men search for the meddling subordinate's whereabouts in order to punish him.

He was nowhere to be found, however.

"Humph. Ah, well, wherever he is, there's no place of refuge in all the universe for him now. In the end, he'll die in a gutter somewhere. Shall we just leave him be?"

Things were moving forward quickly in the present, and getting off of Odin and back to his own domain took precedence over searching for the likes of Ferner. The evacuation plan was drawn up by a commodore named Ansbach. Word was spread around that Duke von Braunschweig would invite the emperor to a garden party at his villa. Invitations were even sent out, but on the night before it was to be held, the duke himself secretly escaped with only his family and a small number of subordinates.

When Reinhard learned of this, he knew right away that the time had come to put his own long-gestating plan into action.

On Reinhard's orders, Wittenfeld, leading eight thousand armed troops, occupied all buildings belonging to the Ministry of Military Affairs, and with the arrest of Imperial Marshal Ehrenberg he took control of its ability to dispatch formal orders to the empire's entire military.

As for the anti-Reinhard faction, the greater part of their number had already departed from the capital of Odin, leaving almost no one to resist Wittenfeld aside from a sole captain who stood blocking his way before the door to the minister's office. The captain suffered serious injury when Wittenfeld drew his personal sidearm and shot him.

The white-haired marshal with his old-fashioned monocle showed no sign of distress even when he saw Wittenfeld stride in through his door. He assumed an attitude that was unperturbed to the point of arrogance.

"And just who gave you permission, you greenhorn upstart, to come barging into my office? I don't know what you want, but it's plain to see you know nothing of proper decorum."

Flashing a cold smile with his eyes, Wittenfeld holstered his gun and saluted with mock respect.

"Pardon my rudeness. What I want, Your Excellency, is for all people to recognize that the times are changing."

Between the two of them was an age difference of half a century. The old man belonged to a camp that bore its traditions on its back; the young man to one that was trying to upend those traditions.

After the two men glared at one another for a long moment, the old marshal's shoulders slumped.

Next, Imperial Military Command Headquarters was occupied by force, and Marshal Steinhof, the secretary-general, was also arrested.

By this time, outside Planet Odin's atmosphere, satellite orbit was under the complete control of Kircheis's fleet, and the Kempf and von Reuentahl fleets were positioned beyond him in outer space, on full alert.

There were some among the nobles who, upon learning that Odin had been

taken over by the Reinhard faction, made attempts to flee, but those who came charging into the spaceports were arrested by security guards under the command of Mittermeier. Even those who took off in private spacecraft found it impossible to slip through Kircheis's surveillance network. Kircheis dealt courteously with these captured nobles, though that hardly lessened their sense of defeat.

The several who ran to Count Franz von Mariendorf's estate asking for protection and mediation with Reinhard were among the cleverest of the lot. These were received by Hilda, who won their trust with her lucid and confident tones. Taking care not to sound too pushy, she steadily and surely succeeded in putting them in her debt.

Among those who had failed to evacuate was Commodore von Streit. He had been left behind when his lord and master had secretly departed Odin. The men and women of House Braunschweig had not abandoned him intentionally; from their standpoint, they had merely forgotten him.

Von Streit, placed under arrest and bound with electromagnetic handcuffs, was dragged before Reinhard and interrogated.

"There is a rumor that you advised Duke von Braunschweig to have me assassinated. Is it true?"

"It's true." Perhaps he had resigned himself to his fate; Streit didn't feel a trace of shame.

"Why did you suggest such a thing?"

"Because it was obvious that if we left you alone, things would end up the way they are today. If my lord had only been more decisive, it wouldn't be me wearing these handcuffs—it would be you. It's truly a shame that he wasn't, not only for Duke von Braunschweig's House, but for the Goldenbaum Dynasty as well."

Reinhard did not become angry. Rather, he looked like he was admiring the man's bravery as he regarded him, and at last he ordered a guard to remove his handcuffs.

As von Streit rubbed his aching wrists, he couldn't help feeling surprised.

"I'd hate to kill a man like you," said Reinhard. "I'm going to give you a travel pass, so you can go to Duke von Braunschweig and fulfill your oath of loyalty."

This generous proposal was not greeted with unconditional gratitude.

"If I may prevail on you to hear a selfish request, I would like your leave to remain here on Odin."

"Oh? Then you won't return to your master?"

"Yes, milord. My reason is this ..."

There was a shade of bitterness in von Streit's voice. Even if he safely departed Odin and ran straight to Duke von Braunschweig, his master would not rejoice at his coming. Rather, he would suspect him and doubtless conclude that it was due to some secret bargain struck with Reinhard that he had been permitted to leave. Depending on how things went, there was even the possibility of his being imprisoned or executed. As when he was fleeing Odin, Duke von Braunschweig left many subordinates and vassals behind and tended to have little regard for his followers' sense of loyalty.

"That's the sort of man he is. He's certainly not a stupid person, but ..."

The commodore trailed off with a sigh.

"I see. In that case, why not come work for me? I'll make you a rear admiral."

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't feel like making an enemy tomorrow of the lord I've served till today. Please forgive me."

Reinhard nodded, gave von Streit an ID card, and set him free.

Captain Ferner had also been among those late in taking flight. Hiding out in the downtown area, he had managed to avoid arrest, but that had had no effect on the dilemma he was in. After careful consideration, he decided to turn himself in to the military police voluntarily, meet with Reinhard directly, and in so doing, carve out a way forward for himself.

Ferner, a man far more practical than von Streit, told Reinhard, "I've given up on my lord, Duke von Braunschweig, so how about taking me on as your subordinate?" Nor did he try to hide the fact of his troop mobilization and what he had been planning.

"In that case, answer me this: on what grounds has your sense of loyalty allowed you to abandon your lord of so many years?"

"A loyal heart is something you only render to someone who can comprehend its worth. To devote oneself to a master who can't recognize his servants' qualities would be like throwing a jewel into the mud. Wouldn't you agree that that would be a loss for society?"

"Brazen fellow, aren't you?"

Reinhard shook his head in disbelief, but acknowledging that there was nothing sinister in Ferner's words and deeds, he took him on as a staff officer. If the man had this much nerve, it was unlikely to atrophy even under von Oberstein, whose cool head people likened to ice.

Von Oberstein wasn't the type to intentionally bully his subordinates, but his demeanor was too severe and too calm, so there was a feeling among his young staff officers that they couldn't even make a careless joke.

When Ferner joined their ranks, he was at first the object of cold stares, but he rapidly established his footing. He knew very well his own position and role. He was there to work as antivenom. And should the need and will be there, he was also a man who could become a powerful, fast-acting antidote to the problem of von Oberstein.

Reinhard added to his duties as commander in chief of the Imperial Space Armada those of minister of military affairs and commander in chief of Imperial Military Command Headquarters, thus attaining complete dictatorial powers, at least insofar as the military was concerned.

Emperor Erwin Josef II gave Reinhard the title of Supreme Commander of the Imperial Military. Naturally, this was not the idea of the six-year-old child but that of the one receiving the title.

At the same time, an imperial edict was handed down to Reinhard. It read, "Bring into subjection Duke von Braunschweig and his cohorts, who, having joined in private confederacy to plot rebellion against the emperor, have become traitors to the nation."

It was April 6. Reports had already reached Reinhard regarding the unusual series of happenings that were breaking out one by one within the Free Planets Alliance.

All the pieces were in place. Reinhard and Kircheis shook hands on the occasion of their temporary separation. Kircheis was leading one-third of the

whole military as a separate force.

“Very soon, Kircheis. Very soon the universe will be ours.”

Reinhard’s expression was one of utter fearlessness. How precious had Kircheis esteemed that look, those eyes, since his days of boyhood!

CHAPTER 3

THE YANG FLEET MOBILIZES

The first blow against the Free Planets Alliance was struck on March 30. Not many days had passed since Yang Wen-li had departed the capital of Heinessen.

As such, there had been little time for Admiral Bucock, commander in chief of the space armada, to make much progress in his investigation of a possible coup d'état scheme. There was also the fact that the command of vast fleets had always been where the old admiral's heart was; he had never enjoyed the sort of work that military police do. Nevertheless, he had by this point already handpicked a team of investigators and had personally taken the first step in turning up the military's dark underside.

What Yang had unveiled before Bucock had been a work of art in logical thinking, but that didn't mean it came with clear-cut physical evidence. It was because Yang himself had been very much aware of this that he had taken his concerns to Bucock and no one else.

"I'm the only one that young man trusts to not get involved in that kind of foolishness. Which for me means I've got to make sure his confidence is rewarded."

The old admiral had lost his son in battle during the course of the long war and, having no grandchildren, lived only with his wife. The flavor of the simple food-stall fare he had shared with Yang and Julian was a fond memory for him—not that he would have ever admitted that to anyone.

March was almost over.

It was Admiral Cubresly who met with the unexpected misfortune.

Cubresly, director of the Free Planets Alliance Military Joint Operational Headquarters, had assumed that seat at the end of last year. The position had been held by Marshal Sitolet for the five years prior; however, he had resigned from the post last year in acceptance of blame for the alliance's historic defeat in the Amritsar Stellar Region.

Sitolet himself had been against that reckless invasion, but as the number one officer in uniform, liability had been inescapable. He was presently away from Heinessen, running an orchard on his homeworld of Cassina.

On the day that it happened, Director Cubresly, having completed an inspection tour of military facilities in the star district nearest Heinessen, had just

returned from the military spaceport to Joint Operational Headquarters. He arrived flanked by his top aide and five guards.

When they entered the lobby, a figure rose from a seat in the visitors' waiting area and approached them with slightly unbalanced steps. The guards stiffened, but then a smile—or really just the shape of one—rose up on the bloodless face of the man, not yet thirty, and he called out to the director.

“Admiral Cubresly, it's me, sir—Andrew Fork.”

After a moment's pause, recognition dawned on Cubresly's face. “Oh, I thought you were still in rehab,” he said.

Commodore Fork, the man directly responsible for the reckless planning of the Battle of Amritsar, had suffered an attack of conversion hysteria just before the battle, had temporarily lost his sight, and after the defeat had been ordered off to reserve duty and mandatory hospitalization. It had been a hard setback for the young elite who had graduated at the top of his class from Officers' Academy.

“I've been released from the hospital already. And I've come before Your Excellency today to request my return to active-duty service.”

“Active duty?” Cubresly tilted his head slightly in surprise. Ordinarily, it would have been a breach of decorum to stop the director in the lobby and attempt to speak with him on the spot, but Cubresly did know Fork personally and, not being the sort to take an arrogant attitude toward a subordinate, he decided on the spot to hear Fork out.

“Well, what does your doctor have to say?”

“That I've made a full recovery, of course. No objections to my returning to active duty.”

“Is that so? In that case, you need to go through the formal procedure. Get a medical certificate and statement of guarantee from your doctor, and turn those in to the Defense Committee's HR division along with your Request for Return to Active Duty form. Then, if it's formally accepted, your request will be granted.”

“That way will take too long, sir. If possible, I'd like to be serving my country on active duty again as soon as tomorrow.”

“Formal procedures take time, Commodore.”

“Which is why I thought that with Your Excellency's assistance ...”

The gleam in Admiral Cubresly's eyes grew sharper.

“Reserve Commodore Fork, there seems to be something you don't understand. I am authorized to ensure procedures are followed, not to break the rules. I've heard rumors about you on several occasions. They say you've got a tendency to give yourself special treatment, and from where I stand, it's hard to say you're completely recovered yet.”

Fork's features went rigid, and his skin—pale to begin with—went practically white as a sheet.

“First, you need to start by following the procedures prescribed. Unless you do that, you won't be able to get along with the other men even if you do come back. That would be bad for you and bad for those around you. I'm telling you this for your own good. Try again, and make a fresh start.”

Cubresly did not truly comprehend the name of Fork's illness—conversion hysteria. It meant that the patient sought complete satisfaction of his ego, causing the neurological system to become unbalanced. No matter how much reason and sincerity there was in Cubresly's warning, it was meaningless to Fork. Like some

tyrant of the ancient world, all he was interested in was an unqualified yes.

“Excellency!”

Cubresly’s aide, Captain Witty, cried out a warning mingled with a scream, just as a white flash of light shone out from Fork’s hand, silently penetrating the right side of the director of Joint Operational Headquarters.

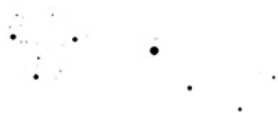
Admiral Cubresly stared back blankly and staggered as his firm, heavysset body lost its balance. Captain Witty caught him and kept him from falling.

Commodore Fork was already pinned beneath the piled bodies of several sturdy security guards. The miniature blaster he had concealed in his sleeve had also been wrested away.

“Call a doctor!” cried Witty. In the heat of his anger, he was even screaming at the guards. “You were slow! Why didn’t you grab him before he fired? You useless—! What do you think you’re here for!”

The guards apologized; the captive Fork they knocked around more than was really necessary.

Fork’s disheveled hair clung to his sweaty brow. Underneath it, he was staring fixedly into his own lost future, with eyes focused on nothing.



When he heard the report, Admiral Bucock literally jumped up from his chair. He had never imagined that the sneak attack might come in such a form. The old admiral, of course, didn’t believe for a second that this was a single, isolated incident.

“So, how is the director?”

“He’s going to pull through, sir. However, they say he needs three months to make a full recovery and undisturbed bed rest for the time being.”

“Oh well, I guess we should count our blessings,” Bucock murmured.

He felt something akin to a nasty aftertaste. At the time of the Battle of Amritsar, he had been the one who had torn into Fork for his incompetence and irresponsibility, triggering his episode. If Fork’s intention had been to get even, the victim might very well have been Bucock instead of Cubresly.

The news that Reserve Commodore Fork had assaulted and wounded Admiral Cubresly, director of Joint Operational Headquarters, sent a shock wave of horror across all of Planet Heinessen, then rode the FTL networks to every corner of the Free Planets Alliance.

The incident was so embarrassing to the military that some even gave wistful voice to this perilous thought:

“Were this the empire, we could ban coverage of this kind of thing.”

The most pressing matter now was the need for a leader at Joint Operational Headquarters. Either an acting director or a successor for Cubresly had to be appointed.

If the number one position among uniformed officers was director of Joint Operational Headquarters, then number two was commander in chief of the space armada.

When the Defense Committee sounded out Bucock about taking on the duties of temporary acting director as well, he refused on the spot. To give the organization's number one and number two positions to the same person would be to open up a path toward dictatorial powers. This was sound reasoning on the part of the elderly admiral, but inwardly, he also thought it necessary to keep these two targets for terrorist attacks well apart from one another.

Bucock was not afraid of being targeted by terrorists. However, if he were to be assassinated after both offices had been unified in his person, then two huge organizations—the Alliance Armed Forces Space Armada and Joint Operational Headquarters—would both lose their chief and become paralyzed. If even one of those two were not up and running, the FPA's entire military might lose its ability to function.

In the end, the one chosen to be acting director was the eldest of the three deputy directors, one Admiral Dawson. When Bucock heard the news, he thought to himself: *Maybe I should've taken the job after all.*

Dawson was not so much a serious man as a timid and nervous one. The positions he had held in his career included MP squad commander and Defense Committee Intelligence Bureau director, but back when he had served as the First Fleet's Rear Service chief of staff, he had behaved like a petty bureaucrat, warning against the waste of foodstuffs, going around inspecting the dust chutes of every kitchen in every ship in the fleet, and driving the crews to distraction with announcements of things like how many dozen kilos of potatoes had been needlessly thrown away that week. He also had a reputation for holding on to personal grudges. One man who had excelled him at Officers' Academy in terms of class ranking only had apparently been demoted for some kind of error and ended up under Dawson's command—the story was he had tormented him endlessly over it.

In any case, however, the appointment was settled.

The next incident took place the following day.

There was an accident at a ground base under the auspices of Capital Defense Command Headquarters. An aging interplanetary missile suddenly exploded as it was being inspected in the maintenance center.

The cause had been inadequate insulation, which had allowed an electrical current from the propulsion system to flow into the fuse in the main body. This clearly implied a weakness in the weapons production system, but the thing that shocked the public was that the fourteen mechanics caught in the blast—all of whom died instantly—had been minors, all of them still in their teens.

Had the human resource pool gone that dry?

A chill ran through the citizenry. They understood the reason. It was because the war had gone on too long. Even within the armed forces, adults were disappearing from everywhere except the front line ...

Jessica Edwards, representing the antiwar faction in the National Assembly, expressed condolences to the victims' families and, after criticizing the military's lack of management skills, took society as a whole to task for continuing to make war.

“What future can there be for a society that sacrifices on the altar of war the young men who should be shouldering its future? Can a society like that even be called sane? We must awaken from this mad dream and ask ourselves, *What is the*

best, most realistic course for us now? And that question has only one answer. The answer is peace ..."

Bucock was watching the broadcast inside his office at Space Armada Command Headquarters. His aide, Lieutenant Commander Pfeifer, tsked his displeasure.

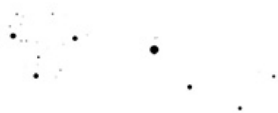
"That woman just says anything she pleases, doesn't she? She has no idea how hard we work. After all, if the empire were to invade, there'd be no antiwar peace activism and no freedom of speech either. She's got a lot of nerve."

"No, what she's saying is right," the old admiral said, putting a lid on his aide's outburst of emotionally skewed logic. "A society where the oldest people are the ones who die first is one I'd say has its act together. It's one where an old soldier like me lives on while the young boys die that's screwed up somewhere. And if nobody's there to point that out, the craziness'll just keep getting worse and worse. Society needs people like her. Though I don't think I'd want to marry a woman who was that good a speaker."

That last comment was the kind of joke Bucock often like to make.

Bucock himself was in a kind of a funk lately that would have been unbearable if he didn't crack a joke every now and then. Earlier that day, he had gone to pay his respects to the newly appointed acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters. Dawson, fourteen years Bucock's junior, had blustered so much it was comical, telling Bucock in a voice louder than necessary things altogether unnecessary: "I expect even those with very long service records to respect order within the organization and to obey my commands."

Bucock had almost gotten cranky with him. If the old admiral had started talking about the possibility of a coup d'état and what measures should be taken to prevent it, the timid acting director might well have started foaming at the mouth.



In the dim room, a conversation was being held in low voices.

"Commodore Fork nearly assassinated Director Cubresly. The director's going to pull through, however."

"Fork can talk a good game, but talk is all it is. He's always been that way. Even during the fight at Amritsar ..."

In that voice was a complex weave of ridicule and disappointment. Muttered words of agreement rose up from all quarters.

"But by seriously wounding the director, our goal of degrading Joint Operational HQ's functionality has at least minimally been achieved. In that sense, Fork's done rather well. Remember, abject failure was also very much a possibility."

"Still, I trust there's no danger that he'll talk about us? Things being the way they are, even the MPs could turn a blind eye toward the illegality of torture or make use of truth serums."

"They probably will. That's no cause for alarm, though. He's been subjected to

very thorough deep-level suggestion treatment: Fork planned and executed the whole thing by himself. There were no orders or suggestions from anyone.”

Because this was gratifying to Fork’s own self-righteous image of himself, it had been child’s play to make the man himself believe it, and the roots of that belief had sunk deep. Barring the use of some imaginary device that could plumb the deepest depths of the human consciousness—that could analyze and re-create a representational construct of it—there was no way to unravel the truth behind his actions.

“Fork will live out the rest of his days as a madman in a mental hospital. It’s sad for him, but there are plenty of people worse off. We have a duty to save our homeland, to destroy the empire, and to execute justice throughout the universe. There’s no place here for sentiment.”

The voice resounded solemnly, speaking almost as if its owner were trying to convince himself.

“More important is what happens next. Although Director Cubresly lives, for the next two, three months, he may as well be dead as far as his life as a public official is concerned. As for his acting replacement, Dawson, it’s bizarre that a man like him would even make full admiral, and, clerical skills aside, the men have no confidence in him. For a while at least, Joint Operational Headquarters is going to be plagued with outbreaks of confusion ... meaning that there’s no reason to delay execution. Make every preparation for D-day.”

II

That year, from the end of March through the middle of April, the thirteen billion citizens of the Free Planets Alliance did not lack for material to stir up fear and anxiety.

March 30: Attempted assassination of Joint Operational Headquarters director Cubresly.

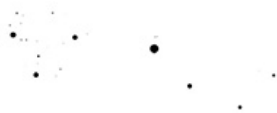
April 3: Planet Neptis occupied by partial uprising of military forces stationed there.

April 5: Armed revolt on Planet Kaffar.

April 6: Large-scale civil war erupts in the Galactic Empire.

April 8: Planet Palmerend occupied by rebel forces.

April 10: Planet Shanpool placed under occupation by armed forces.



From a place far removed from the capital of Heinessen, Yang was carefully observing these incidents.

Although his predictions hadn’t encompassed the attempted assassination of Director Cubresly, everything else was unfolding pretty much as he had expected. Was it all right to congratulate himself for reading Marquis von Lohengramm’s hand this time?

And yet from Reinhard's standpoint, this was ultimately nothing more than a kind of preventive action; even if it failed, there would still be plenty of opportunity for regaining lost ground. To Reinhard, the importance of this scheme was probably down at the level of "no harm in trying."

And yet the whole Free Planets Alliance had been turned upside down because of it.

Was Marquis von Lohengramm—as some claimed—a "grand master at moving his soldiers around the board"? Yang shrugged. That blond-haired kid had thrown the whole alliance into chaos without mobilizing so much as one soldier, hadn't he?

To say "I read your hand" after that would just feel hollow. Yang hadn't been able to stop him, nor could he foresee how things would play out from here, aside from the likelihood of an attempted coup in the capital. Even Reinhard himself, author and director of this little drama, had probably not scripted the scenario any further than that point.

Which meant that what happened from here on out would all depend on the abilities of the primary and supporting cast. *In that case, thought Yang, who is it that's playing the lead? Who's the ringleader who's going to pull the trigger on the coup? Guess we'll know soon enough in any case, but I'm still awfully curious.*

On April 13, an FTL arrived from Heinessen bearing orders from Admiral Dawson.

"Admiral Yang: Mobilize the Iserlohn Patrol Fleet, and with all possible haste quell the revolts on Neptis, Kaffar, Palmerend, and Shanpool," he said.

"In all four places?"

Yang, unsurprisingly, was taken aback by this. He had expected a mobilization order to come down sooner or later but only for one site. He had been sure that the fleet at Heinessen would be mobilized to deal with the other three.

Yang pressed his concern: "That's going to empty out Iserlohn Fortress for quite some time. Are you all right with that?"

"At present, the empire is in a state of full-scale civil war. The danger of them attacking Iserlohn with a large force is exceedingly small. What I ask of you, Commander Yang, is that you fulfill your duties as a soldier without worry or reservation."

I see now, Yang thought, impressed. So there really are people in the world who think this way, too—who get the cause and effect, the action and reaction, just magnificently backward. True, they have no idea what's really going on, but still ...

This had gotten unexpectedly humorous. Admiral Dawson, acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters, had a reputation for mediocre tactical planning, and contrary to all expectation, that might mean he was just the sort of man who *wouldn't* do exactly what Reinhard wanted.

If a large regiment were left sitting in the capital, that would throw a wrench into the plan and cause problems for the conspirators. Unable to make their move even if they wanted to, their plan might never be put into action. Of course, even if they were thus obstructed, they'd probably try something else, but at least for the time being, they wouldn't be able to strike with the fleet away and do as they pleased with an undefended capital.

Of course, all of this had only just happened to turn out this way. Dawson's intention was probably to work Yang and his subordinates to the bone. That

much Yang had surmised, but what he couldn't understand was the reason why Dawson was doing it. Though he had heard Dawson was not one to forget a personal grudge, Yang had never met the man in person; therefore, there was no way he could have possibly slighted him.

Yang's question was answered by Julian. No one was tighter-lipped than that boy, so sometimes Yang would let him listen when he was thinking out loud, halfway talking to himself.

When Julian heard Yang wondering aloud about Dawson's motivation, he chuckled and said it was easy to explain.

"How old is this Dawson fellow?"

"Midforties, probably."

"And you're thirty, Admiral, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that finally happened."

"Then that explains it. You're both full admirals, even though you're that far apart in age. Unless you're as old as Admiral Bucock, he's going to envy you."

Yang scratched his head.

"Is that it? I see. How careless of me."

Yang had no equal when it came to guessing the thoughts of an enemy on the battlefield, but Julian had just pointed out his blind spot.

Over the course of the past year, Yang had rocketed to prominence, rising three ranks from commodore to full admiral. To the man himself, this was nothing but headache and hassle, but to others—particularly the type to whom rank and position were everything—he was doubtless an object of envy and jealousy.

Those were the kinds of people who couldn't recognize the existence of values that differed from their own, so there was no way they were going to believe that Yang's wish was to retire from active duty as soon as possible, live off his pension, and write a book on history sometime before he died.

If you're the man they call Miracle Yang, let's see you put all four insurrections down by yourself. If you succeed, that's fine and dandy; if you fail, I can deal with you however I like. That was probably what Dawson was thinking.

If I do fail, maybe they'll let me retire, was Yang's thought.

It was just as that outrageous thought was occurring to Yang that Julian spoke again.

"Attacking all four of those places one by one is going to take too long and be a major headache, isn't it?"

"You said it," Yang agreed with a strong nod. "Above all, it goes against my personal philosophy of winning with as little effort as possible. How would you settle this if it were up to you?"

Julian leaned forward. Lately, Julian's interest in military tactics had been growing stronger.

"How about this: concentrate the enemies from all four sites in one location, and hit them there."

Yang took off his black military beret and looked up at the ceiling.

"That's a good idea, but there are two problems with it. One is the method: how do you get enemies from four different sites to move to the same place? The enemy's caused multiple simultaneous uprisings for the express purpose of stretching the government's forces thin, so I don't see them throwing that advantage away voluntarily. After all, if they concentrate their forces, it only

follows that we'll concentrate ours as well."

Lightly, he set the beret back on his head.

"And the other thing is that concentrating one's enemies in one location goes against the fundamentals of strategy, which say you should knock out your opponent's regiments one by one, without letting them link up."

"So it's a bad idea?"

Julian looked disappointed. The boy had thought his brain cells had been running at full speed.

Yang gave him a little smile.

"The idea's fine. You just have to think about how to apply it. Okay, so for the time being, let's leave aside the question of how to lure them out."

He thought about it for a little while, then continued.

"We lure them away from their strongholds—that part's fine. But nowhere is it written that we have to wait around for them to rendezvous. So instead, we predict the route by which the enemy will try to link up, then take them out individually along the way. If the enemy and allied forces are roughly the same size numerically, our side can split into two groups: the first can hit enemies A and B at staggered intervals, and the other can hit C and D. The likelihood of victory would be very high, since we'd be hitting each enemy formation with double its own force strength."

Julian nodded with passionate intensity.

"There's another way to do it, too, where the whole fleet moves together. First we strike enemy formations A and B separately, then head for the enemy's rendezvous point to face formations C and D. At that point, it would give us a force multiplier if we could trick the enemy into mistaking friend and foe or if we could split the fleet in two to catch them in a pincer movement. With this method, you fight the enemy four-to-one at the outset, then two-to-one later on, so the odds of winning really are quite good."

The boy sighed with admiration, while at the same time feeling hopelessly pathetic himself. Admiral Yang gushed out cunning plans like a fountain. Julian, on the other hand, would have been no match even for Yang's prior self at age fifteen. This, in spite of the fact that he wanted to improve—no matter how small the increment—so as to become able to help him.

Julian had no intention of just living complacently as Yang's ward. While he never dreamed of anything so grandiose as becoming a partner on equal footing with him, he wanted, in some form or fashion, to make himself indispensable to Yang.

"But anyway, I don't want to use either of those strategies this time out. After all, they're soldiers of the alliance, same as us. Even if we fought and won, it'd leave nothing but scars."

"That's the truth."

"So, let's think about how to get them to surrender without a fight. That way, most importantly, is easy."

"Easy on soldiers, but hard on commanders."

"Ah, you get it now." Yang smiled, but his smile didn't last long. "Still, I figure over half the people alive right now have it as hard as the commanders, who get so many soldiers killed."

Voices saying that Yang Wen-li had landed his position too easily had reached

even the ears of Yang himself. Those voices came from multiple sources, it seemed, and perhaps Dawson had lent a hand in spreading them. In any case, though, had Yang longer borne in mind those irresponsible words, he might have recognized instantly what lurked beneath Dawson's order ...

III

Yang summoned his staff to the meeting room and relayed the orders from Admiral Dawson.

"So he's telling us to suppress all four of those uprisings?"

Yang's staff officers—Fischer, Caselnes, von Schönkopf, Murai, and Patrichev—were also stunned by how out of left field it seemed. Von Schönkopf was the first to regain his composure.

"So he's going to hold the capital's force strength in reserve while working us to the bone."

He had made the same guess as Yang but had also latched on to the reason with laser-like precision. "It seems someone's jealous, Admiral," he said, looking at Yang with a smirk. There was nothing Yang could say to that. Perhaps Julian and von Schönkopf were not so much perceptive as Yang was merely clueless.

"At any rate, it's an order from Joint Operational HQ, so all we can do is follow it. The nearest one to Iserlohn is Shanpool, so shall we start there?"

Murai was reaching for the 3-D display's switch when a buzzer sounded, and the image of a comm officer appeared on a screen on the wall.

Yang noticed that the uniform scarf worn around the comm officer's neck had a huge stain on it. He had probably been surprised while drinking coffee and had accidentally tilted his cup too far.

"Admiral, there's a disturbance in the capital. We've just received some shocking intelligence—"

"What kind of disturbance?" Murai demanded scoldingly.

The comm officer swallowed audibly and managed to squeeze out these words: "It ... it's a coup d'état, sir!"

Everyone excluding Yang drew in their breath. Patrichev was so shocked that his huge body trembled, and he rose to his feet.

The view on the screen changed, and the Capital FTL Center appeared. However, instead of the face of a smiling—or pretending-to-be-smiling—announcer, a soldier in his prime was sitting haughtily in the broadcast seat.

"Repeat: We hereby declare that as of April 13 of the year SE 797, the capital of Heinessen has effectively been placed under the control of the Free Planets Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic. The Charter of the Alliance is hereby suspended, and all laws will be superseded by the decisions and instructions of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic."

Iserlohn's high-ranking officers searched each other's faces. Then in unison, they all turned and stared at their young, dark-haired commander.

Yang stared into the screen silently. He looked remarkably calm to his staff officers.

So ultimately, it looked like Admiral Dawson's schemes had lacked the strength necessary to make the coup faction change its plans. Or was it better to say the conspirators had taken swift action? Or that Dawson's responses had been even

more sluggish than they had expected? Most likely, it was a combination of these last two.

“The ‘Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic,’ eh ...”

Yang’s murmured tone sounded most unsupportive of it. He felt no beauty or sincerity in exaggerated words like “saving the country” and “patriotism” and “concern for the nation’s future.” Why was it that those who threw around those lines most loudly, most brazenly, were the ones leading warm, comfortable lives far away from danger?

At last, the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic announced a series of amendments to the Charter of the Alliance. The changes were as follows:

1. Establishment of a political system to unite the will of the people around the noble objective of bringing down the Galactic Empire.
2. Orderly control of political activities and speech opposed to the nation’s interests.
3. Granting of police judiciary powers to members of the military.
4. Declaration of nationwide martial law for an undetermined period. Accordingly, all demonstrations and labor strikes were forbidden as well.
5. Complete nationalization of all interstellar transportation and transmission facilities. Accordingly, all spaceports would be placed under the military’s management as well.
6. Expulsion from the public sector of all who held antiwar and/or antimilitary beliefs.
7. Suspension of the National Assembly.
8. Criminalization of conscientious objection to military service.
9. Severe punishment for corruption among politicians and public employees.
10. Elimination of harmful entertainments, pursuant to the recovery of unaffected simplicity and virtuous strength in the nation’s manners and customs.
11. Abolition of excessive government aid to the weak, in order to prevent the weakening of society ...

“Oh dear, what have we here, now?”

Staring at the screen, Yang was frankly astonished. What this Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic wanted was the very essence of a reactionary militaristic system of government. Furthermore, there was hardly any difference at all between their system and the one Rudolf von Goldenbaum had advocated five centuries ago.

What had these last five hundred years *been* to the human race? With Rudolf’s example right there in front of them to study, what had humanity learned? This Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic was about to breathe new life into Rudolf’s corpse, and all in the name of overthrowing the empire he had given birth to.

Yang laughed. There was no way he couldn’t. This was a farce beyond compare—a hideous farce unparalleled.

But even though this first act had developed as a farce, that was not how it was to be ended.

“Citizens and soldiers of the alliance, I will now introduce the chairman of the

Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic—”

And when that name was spoken, it felt as if the air in the room had condensed into a heavy liquid.

The middle-aged man shown on the screen was someone Yang knew well. Brown hair flecked with gray, a thin but handsome face. Yang had spoken with that individual countless times, had even dined with him. He had a daughter, and that daughter was ...

The sound of a low cry made Yang turn around.

His aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Frederica Greenhill, was standing behind him, her face gone deathly pale.

Her hazel eyes were staring at the screen, opened so wide that they could open no further.

She was gazing at the face of her father, Admiral Dwight Greenhill, displayed on the screen.

IV

The Phezzan Land Dominion.

A commerce and trading state situated within the so-called Phezzan Corridor that lay between the Galactic Empire and the Free Planets Alliance. Its homeworld and its artificial colonies harbored a population of two billion, and its wealth was such that it rivaled that of the empire and the alliance.

At present, Phezzan's intelligence-gathering apparatus was running at full power. The information gathered passed through the secretariat, from whence it poured into the hands of the head of state, Landesherr Adrian Rubinsky.

It was by this mechanism that Rubinsky, “the Black Fox of Phezzan,” was able to keep abreast of developments regarding the coup d'état from the comfort of his home.



April 13. The day of the coup.

Admiral Bucock, commander in chief of the Alliance Armed Forces Space Armada, received a message at his office from Admiral Greenhill, head of the Defense Committee's Bureau of Field Investigations.

“Ground combat units will be holding large-scale training exercises throughout the capital today. Plans for these maneuvers were made at the start of the year, so we ask all departments to pay it no mind and do your regular jobs as if nothing were out of the ordinary. This training will be of great significance regarding the situation on the frontier ...”

That message went out to almost everyone in the military leadership, and the public as well was notified by ordinary broadcasts.

It followed, then, that even when groups of armed soldiers were sighted in action on city streets, there were few who suspected anything amiss. Even when somebody did become suspicious and call the military police, all doubt was laid

to rest with a single phrase: “It’s just a drill.” When a message arrived in the name of the Bureau of Field Investigations’ top executive, the most professional officers were the ones who questioned it least.

Even Bucock hadn’t given it too much thought—granted, he had been incredibly busy with the oversight of the space armada as it geared up for action on the frontier—nor had it ever occurred to him that someone might stage a coup while the main force of the space armada was still in the capital.

At high noon, however, the old admiral was being led away at gunpoint to meet with the coup’s prime conspirators.

These were Admiral Dwight Greenhill, director of the Bureau of Field Investigations, and Vice Admiral Bronze, Director of the Intelligence Bureau. It baffled the old admiral to see such high-ranking officials participating.

“I see,” Bucock snorted. “So I take it the Intelligence Bureau and the Bureau of Field Investigations have been corrupted for quite some time?”

The duties of the Bureau of Field Investigations—domestically—encompassed the management and operation of noncombat activities such as training, rescue operations, and migration of troops and facilities, so if its director was one of the conspirators, it would be a simple matter to move the required units into position.

From somewhere among the several men surrounding him, there drifted a stench of stale alcohol.

“Humph, I remember that smell.” The white-haired commander in chief turned a bitter glare on the source of that odor. “Rear Admiral Lynch, captured by the empire at El Facil some years ago.”

“I’m honored you remember,” Lynch replied with slurred laughter.

“Much as I’d like to forget, that isn’t possible. After all, you abandoned your duty to protect civilians ... you abandoned your responsibility to the soldiers under your command ... and you tried to escape to safety by yourself ... Oh, you’re a *celebrity*.”

Lynch didn’t look like his feelings were hurt. He accepted those biting words with a faint smirk and then, with a flourish, pulled out a small bottle of whiskey, unscrewed the cap, and took a swallow from it. The officers surrounding him—geniune ascetics—frowned at him with furrowed brows. That Lynch’s compatriots held him in contempt was plain to see, and Bucock was at a loss to explain what a man like him was doing in their ranks to begin with. He turned his eyes back toward Greenhill.

“Your Excellency, I had thought of you as a bastion of reason and conscience even within the military.”

“I’m honored.”

“It looks like I’ve overestimated you, though. All I can think right now is that that reason and conscience of yours must be asleep at the wheel for you to take part in something like this.”

“I’ve thought about this long and hard. Try thinking about it this way, Admiral. Just how corrupt are our politics at present? Just how smothered is our society? We have a mobocracy running rampant as it hides behind a pretty little word like *democracy*, and nowhere do I see the slightest sliver of hope that it can reform itself. What other way is there to bring discipline and reform?”

“So that’s it. Certainly, the present system is corrupt, and it’s reached a dead

end. So what you want to say next is, 'Therefore, I'm bringing it down with armed force.' I'm asking just to see what you'll say, but what happens when you become corrupt, especially given that you have all the weaponry? Who's going to discipline you, and how?"

Bucock's tone was sharp, and his opponent clearly hesitated.

"We won't become corrupt," another voice said with conviction. "We have ideals. Unlike them, we know the definition of shame. We are *incapable* of doing as the present political class does. They fatten their own bellies in the name of pretty words like *democracy*, pandering to the electorate to gain power, making cozy deals with capitalists—neglecting all the while our sacred charge to bring down the Galactic Empire. We're only doing what our passion for the restoration of our nation demands. We've risen up reluctantly, because we had no other choice. Corruption springs from the pursuit of self-interest—we will never be corrupted."

"I wonder," said Bucock. "Looks to me like you're justifying an illegal power grab with pretty words like *restoration* and *sacred charge* and *passion* and so on."

The old admiral's poison tongue cut deep into the officers' sense of pride, stinging them sharply. Voices rose up in anger.

"Admiral Bucock, we want to be as gentlemanly about this as possible, but for my part, I can't help thinking those last words were crossing the line."

"Gentlemanly?" Bucock's laughter rang out in the room, filled with sarcasm. "From the days when human beings were crawling around on all fours right down to this very afternoon, people who break the rules using violence have never been called gentlemen. If that's what you want to be called, though, you've got the power now, so while you still have it, I recommend you get some somebody to write you a new dictionary."

Fury was rippling up from the officers like a heat mirage. With a glance, Greenhill held its ignition in check.

"We could talk all day, but I don't think we're going to find any common ground. We only ask history to be the judge of the decisions we've made."

"History may have nothing to say to you, Admiral Greenhill."

At that, Dwight Greenhill, chairman of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic, looked away.

"Take him to another room. We mustn't lack for courtesy."



Heinessen's strategic points were under the control of rebel units.

Joint Operational Headquarters, Science and Technology Headquarters, and the Space Defense Command and Control Center, as well as the High Council Building and the Interstellar Communications Center, had fallen into the rebel units' hands with hardly any bloodshed. Even Admiral Dawson, acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters, had been confined.

However, the ultimate object of the attack—High Council chairman Job Trünnicht—was nowhere to be found at his office. He was believed to have

escaped by way of a secret passage for use in emergencies and had disappeared underground ...

V

Yang felt like he had a pretty good understanding of how what we call the fates are intrinsically mean-spirited, like old witches.

It was being hammered home to him now, though, that this was just his feeling. Had the fates been furnished with minds and personalities, this was the point where he would have wanted to raise his voice in complaint, saying, "Come on! You've never been *this* mean before!" That, of course, was impossible. Fate was coincidence combined with countless accumulated wills, not some kind of transcendent entity.

But having to do battle with Frederica Greenhill's father so he could protect the authority of a man like Trünicht!

Yang had lost track of how many dozens of laps he'd walked through his private rooms. When he came to himself, young Julian Mintz was standing by the wall, staring at him intently. Yang could see a worried gleam in those dark-brown eyes. Unable to be of help to Yang, the boy was feeling frustrated and powerless.

But what to do next was a decision only Yang could make, and nowhere in the world was there anyone with whom he could share that. Breathing out a sigh, Yang forced a happy-go-lucky smile.

"Julian, get me a glass of brandy. After that, can you get my executive staff together in the meeting room in about fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, sir. Right away."

"Also, call Lieutenant Greenhill for me right quick."

The boy left the room at a run.

If it were all right to not make decisions when he didn't want to, he would be living *la vie en rose*. Although the ancients had said it adds flavor to life when things don't turn out the way we'd like, this time around, the spice seemed a little too hot.

Frederica Greenhill appeared two minutes later. She wore a calm expression, but there was no hiding her sickly complexion. Yang had his own way of resigning himself to his role here: Having lost his father at age sixteen, he had enrolled in the Department of Military History at Officers' Academy after searching for a school where he could study history at no cost. He'd had absolutely no desire to become a soldier, so in a way, he viewed what he had to do now as the tab coming due for his self-serving choice.

But for Frederica, this was like being caught in the sort of thought experiment people used to try to prove the absurdity of gods. She was being put in the position of having to become her own father's enemy. It was a harsh thing for a young woman of twenty-three.

"Lieutenant Greenhill, reporting."

"Ah. You're looking cheerful."

With that, Yang had really put his foot in his mouth. As for Frederica, she also seemed at a loss as to how to respond.

"What is it you need me for?"

"Right ... I'm getting the staff together for yet another meeting, so I'd like you

to handle the prep and run the controls.”

Frederica looked taken aback.

“I—I thought I was going to be relieved of my duties as your aide. I came here expecting that ...”

“You wanna quit?”

Yang’s tone of voice at that moment was rather curt.

“No, but ...”

“If you’re not there for me, I’ll have a rough time of it. I’ve got a terrible memory, and I’m no good with that awful control panel, either. I need a competent aide.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll carry out my duties, Excellency.”

For just an instant, he was able to see through her businesslike expression and catch a glimpse of laughter and tears churning underneath.

“I appreciate it. Go on ahead to the meeting room.”

There were other ways he could have phrased that, but for Yang, it was the best he could manage.

When he left his room, he ran into von Schönkopf in the hallway. The empire’s former citizen saluted and smiled at his superior.

“It seems you haven’t fired Ms. Greenhill.”

“Of course not. Why would I when I can’t find anybody who could do the job better?”

“You’re avoiding the issue,” von Schönkopf replied, although it was rude of him to say so.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, sir, it’s just that ... well, I’ve been wondering about a number of things ... such as what she thinks of Your Excellency. From the standpoint of a subordinate.”

“Well, what do you think about me?” Yang said, assaying a clumsy escape.

“Hmm, I don’t rightly know, to be honest. You’re pretty much a mountain of contradictions.” Von Schönkopf looked back at his superior’s disappointed face with a friendly smile. “What makes me say that? First of all, there’s not a man alive who hates the stupidity of war as much as you do. Yet at the same time, there’s no one better at waging war than you, either. Am I wrong?”

“What do you think of Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm?”

“That it’d be fun to have a go at him.” This outrageous pronouncement came from the empire’s former citizen without the slightest hesitation. “I think that if you were both operating under equivalent conditions you’d probably beat him.”

“Hypotheticals like that are meaningless,” Yang said.

“I know that, sir.”

Tactics was the art of moving troops so as to win on the battlefield. Strategy was the art of preparing conditions that allowed one’s tactics to be used to their utmost potential. Accordingly, von Schönkopf’s supposition was irrelevant to realities on the ground, as it had ignored the element of strategy in war.

“At any rate, let’s move on to the next point. You have an awareness that runs straight down to the bone of just how out of whack the FPA’s current power structure is—in terms of both its capabilities and its morals. Yet in spite of that, you’ll do everything in your power to save it. That is a huge contradiction.”

“Let’s just say that ‘perfect’ is the enemy of ‘good.’ I certainly recognize that the

alliance's present authorities are 'out of whack.' But take a look for yourself at the slogans put out by that Rescue of the Republic thingie. Are those guys not worse than what we've got now?"

"If I must answer ..." said von Schönkopf, eyes brimming with an odd light, "I say we *let* these Military Congress buffoons purge the current regime. Thoroughly and completely. In any case, they'll expose their own shortcomings in due time afterward and lose control of the situation. At that point, you ride in, expel the cleaning staff, and take power as the restorer of democracy. That's what I would call 'better.' "

Dumbfounded, Iserlohn's young commander stared at his subordinate. Von Schönkopf was no longer smiling.

"How about it? Even if it were only a formality, as dictator you could safeguard the practice of democratic government—"

" 'Dictator Yang Wen-li,' huh? Any way I turn that, it just doesn't sound like my style."

"Being a soldier wasn't your style, either, originally. Yet here you are, doing it better than anyone. You'd probably be pretty good at dictatorship, too."

"Commodore von Schönkopf."

"What is it, sir?"

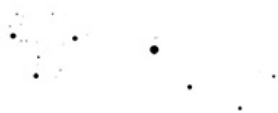
"Have you shared your thoughts on this with anyone else?"

"Of course not."

"Glad to hear it ..."

Saying nothing more, Yang turned his back on von Schönkopf.

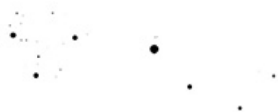
Following along five or six steps behind him, von Schönkopf smiled just a little. Was Yang even aware that there were no other high-ranking officers in the service who let their subordinates speak their minds as freely as he did? It was a pretty hard job, serving as von Schönkopf's commanding officer.



There were many civilians living within Iserlohn, and their anxieties had been heightened by news of the coup d'état at home and the civil war that had erupted in the empire. One such individual noticed Julian when he had gone out to a civilian residential district on an errand for Yang and asked him whether there was really any chance of winning.

The young man looked fixedly at the face of the one accosting him and then, chiding him for his panic, answered with confidence and spirit.

"Admiral Yang Wen-li doesn't fight battles that can't be won."



In no time at all, this exchange became renowned throughout Iserlohn.

“Admiral Yang doesn’t fight battles that can’t be won.” Indeed, victory was the man’s constant companion. Therefore, he was sure to win this time as well. At least on the surface, civilian anxiety had been calmed.

Yang, who heard about what had happened later, confirmed the facts of the matter with Julian, then spoke to him in a teasing voice.

“I hadn’t expected it, but you’ve even got talent as a PR spokesman.”

“But what I told him wasn’t just a bluff, it’s a fact. Isn’t it, Excellency?”

“Uh, yeah. This time, anyway.”

Julian couldn’t help thinking that his guardian’s brow had furrowed ever so slightly.

“Sure hope it always works out that way ...”

When Julian went out to practice piloting one of the single-seat fighter craft called spartanians, Yang called for Commodore von Schönkopf.

Yang had decided to split the fleet under his command into a high-speed mobile unit he would command himself and a rear support unit built around supply and defensive firepower functionality. However, he was still wondering to which unit he would assign von Schönkopf. This he consulted the man himself about, and decided ultimately to place him as a staff officer at his own side.

It was during this conversation that Yang asked him about Julian. This was because von Schönkopf was Julian’s instructor in both shooting and hand-to-hand combat.

“If you mean as a warrior, he pulls his own weight splendidly—in that regard, he’ll be much more useful than you are, Your Excellency.”

Von Schönkopf knew no reserve.

“However, that’s not the kind of thing that Your Excellency is hoping for for Julian, is it?”

Yang’s reply was halfway directed at himself. “There are limits to what people can do, but even so, we can change fate within the ranges of our abilities. I want Julian to change fate within as large a range as possible—even if he doesn’t actually do it, I want him to have that potential.”

“What of your potential?”

“No can do. I’m involved just a little too deeply in the FPA for that kind of thing. Gotta fulfill my obligations to the ones who pay my salary.”

Von Schönkopf looked as though he had not taken that reply entirely as a joke. “I see. Is that why you won’t make Julian a regular soldier? So he won’t have to feel obliged to the Free Planets Alliance the way you do?”

“I hadn’t really thought it through that far ...”

Yang shook his head two or three times. It wasn’t like he always acted based on careful thought and long-term planning. That wasn’t what others seem to think, though. Yang couldn’t say for sure whether that was advantageous or not.



The Alliance Military Joint Operational Headquarters on Heinessen had become a stronghold of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic. Its

top leaders were gathered in an underground meeting room.

When Admiral Greenhill informed them that “Yang Wen-li has refused to participate in the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic,” a soft stir arose from among the attendees.

“Well, all we can do is fight him, then.”

“Let’s get Miracle Yang to show us what he’s got. See for ourselves if he’s as skilled as they say.”

Perhaps these aggressive voices were raised in order to drive away the unease of the speakers.

Admiral Greenhill didn’t join in with their forced enthusiasm, however.

He did not think of seeking his daughter’s forgiveness. Nor was there any chance of her forgiving him. His actions were rooted in his beliefs. If renewal did not come through the military, his homeland would collapse into the depths of corruption. If Yang didn’t understand that, then nothing but war could remain between the two. The decision was not an easy one, but once it was made, his will would not be shaken.

“Admiral Legrange.”

In response to his call, a middle-aged man with a square jaw and close-cropped, platinum-blond hair rose to his feet.

“Take the Eleventh Fleet, and go to Iserlohn to do battle with Yang.”

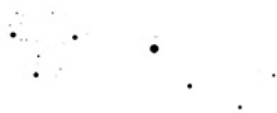
“As you command, sir, but ... what about your daughter?”

It was no secret that Frederica Greenhill was Yang’s aide-de-camp.

“That’s not an issue,” Greenhill said forcefully. Then, in a more moderated tone, he added: “I gave up on my daughter the moment I conceived this plan. It’s also likely that Yang will have relieved her of duty and placed her under house arrest. There’s no need to take her into account.”

“As you wish, sir. Yang will either be slaughtered or forced to surrender.”

The Eleventh Fleet was a rarity in the Alliance Armed Forces Space Armada: a regiment unscathed by prior combat. It had supported the coup d’état, and now, to bar the path of Yang’s advance, it was mobilizing a vast, powerful, and complete force.



On April 20, Yang appointed Caselnes as temporary acting fortress commander and ordered the mobilization of his entire fleet. When asked the destination, he responded thus:

“Ultimately, Heinessen.”

CHAPTER 4

BLOODSHED IN SPACE

Just prior to his boarding the flagship *Brünhild*, Reinhard was paid a visit by an out-of-breath secretary who had come from the Ministry of Military Affairs.

“State your business.”

The secretary stared in admiration at the handsome young commander in his elegant black and silver uniform while awkwardly stating the business at hand—that the enemy’s official nomenclature was still undecided.

“Official nomenclature?”

“Y-yes, milord. I mean, they’re calling themselves the Army of the League of Just Lords, but, naturally, we can’t put something like that in official documents. That said, if we use ‘the rebel forces,’ it doesn’t distinguish them from the so-called Free Planets Alliance. Even so, we have to decide on some kind of official name.”

Reinhard nodded and, pinching his well-formed chin with long, supple fingertips, thought about it for a moment. Before five seconds had elapsed, his fingers came away.

“Here’s a fitting term for their ilk: brigands and usurpers. Refer to them as such in official documents—brigands and usurpers. Understood?”

“Yes, milord. As you wish.”

“Publish it throughout the empire that it is thus ordained, and let those so named know exactly where they stand: ‘You are an army of brigands and usurpers.’ ”

Reinhard raised his voice in laughter. It was a cruel laugh, yet even so it resounded, beautiful and clear, like the ring of precious jewels against one another.

“As you seem to have no other business, I’ll be on my way. Don’t forget what I just told you.”

As Reinhard turned to go, his steps were as light as a man in free fall. Admirals von Oberstein, Mittermeier, von Reuentahl, Kempf, and Wittenfeld all followed along in his wake, and at last the deep-blue sky was all but blotted out by a great fleet of warships departing for the battlefield.

Vice Admiral Mort, commanding officer of the forces left behind, saluted as he saw them off with his aides.

Reinhard had left only a minimal force behind on Odin: just thirty thousand officers and soldiers, charged with protecting the emperor's castle residence of Neue Sans Souci Palace, the admiralität and Ministry of Military Affairs, and the estate where he and his sister resided. Vice Admiral Mort, to whom this home guard had been entrusted, was already in late middle age. He was hardly the type to be called a master tactician, but he was loyal and a man who could be counted on.

The secretary, upon returning to the Ministry of Military Affairs, put Reinhard's order into action right away. FTL transmissions leapt across the void to every quarter of the empire, repeating the phrase "brigands and usurpers."

"Brigands and usurpers! They dare call us an army of brigands and usurpers!"

Indeed, that name dealt a stinging blow to the pride of the highborn nobles, who clung fast to the idea of themselves as a chosen people. Faces gone white with hatred and humiliation, they shattered their wineglasses against the floor, feeling renewed hostility toward the golden brat.

Though to hear the likes of Merkatz's aide von Schneider tell it, the highborn nobles were badmouthing Reinhard as well, so didn't this just make it even?

The nobles were driven by emotion even in small matters, and thus it was no surprise that the strategy meetings of their allied military were also constantly being swayed in one direction or another by their emotions.

Duke von Braunschweig had what for him passed as a tactical plan: He would build nine military strongholds along the route from the imperial capital of Odin to the confederacy's home base—a fortress called Gaiesburg, or "Bald Eagle Castle"—positioning large forces at each to intercept Reinhard's advancing fleet. While fighting their way past one stronghold after another, Reinhard's forces would suffer no small losses in terms of lives and ships, and those that remained would be degraded by the time they got through. That was when he would launch an attack from Gaiesburg and crush them all in one fell swoop.

Merkatz was skeptical of how effective that would be. While it would be nice if Reinhard were kind enough to attack all nine strongholds one by one per special invitation of his enemies, what were they supposed to do if he didn't? If Reinhard were to render each stronghold impotent by destroying its supply lines and communications grid, and then head straight to Gaiesburg for an all-out assault, von Braunschweig's strategy would be proven useless. Worse than useless, actually, since positioning large forces at each stronghold would naturally leave Gaiesburg shorthanded.

When Merkatz expressed to Duke von Braunschweig his opinion on the matter, the duke's face changed color dramatically. The transformation was as vivid as if captured with time-lapse photography.

At times such as these, his attendants would throw themselves to the ground and apologize, foreheads pressed against the floor as they begged their master's forgiveness.

Merkatz, of course, did no such thing.

When at last Duke von Braunschweig wrung from his throat a reply—"Well then, what *should* we do?"—Merkatz explained, feigning unawareness of von Braunschweig's state of mind.

While there was no need to abandon the idea of the nine strongholds, there was also no need to station large forces at them. Instead, each stronghold's function

should remain limited to reconnaissance and electronic surveillance of the enemy, with combat potential concentrated at Gaiesburg.

"So we drag the golden brat all the way to Gaiesburg for a decisive battle? Hmm, that way we go out to meet an enemy that's far from home on a distant campaign and fight them at the peak of their exhaustion."

Duke von Braunschweig said this to demonstrate he was not entirely ignorant of military tactical theory.

"Exactly."

But at Merkat's terse reply, another voice spoke up, saying, "Actually, there's an even more effective tactic we can use."

It was Admiral Staden, who fancied himself an expert on strategic theory.

Previously, he had served under Reinhard at Astarte, but unlike Merkat, he did not recognize Reinhard's talents.

"And what would that be, Admiral Staden?"

"A partial revision of Commander in Chief Merkat's idea," Staden said, with a sidelong glance at Merkat.

The seasoned admiral frowned. He could easily guess what Staden was about to say. It was going to be the same idea that Merkat had for a certain reason already abandoned.

"In short, we organize a large-scale second force and, after luring the golden brat to Gaiesburg, send them in the opposite direction to Odin, where they will capture a weakly defended capital and pledge our support to His Majesty the Emperor."

"Hmm ..."

"Then, once we've had him issue an imperial edict to the effect that Marquis von Lohengramm is the real rebel traitor, his and our positions will be reversed. The golden brat will become an orphan in space, with no home to go back to."

That was exactly what Merkat had expected. He looked down at his coffee, which still hadn't touched his lips. Staden was a theorist but somehow lacked insight when it came to realities on the ground. It was certainly true that Marquis von Lohengramm had emptied out the imperial capital of Odin. And why had he done that? Because there was a reason he felt he could empty it so carelessly. If Staden would only think about that, he would realize that his proposal could have no realistic effectiveness.

"Splendid!" cried a young noble, Count Alfred von Lansberg. His face was flushed with excitement. With one exclamation after another, he praised the grandness, the elegance, the aggressiveness of Staden's proposed plan, easily encouraging it with an unselfish and childlike innocence.

"So," he added, "who's going to command the second force? It'll be a great honor and responsibility."

Then the room fell dead silent.

Count Alfred von Lansberg's words had stirred the mire, releasing something akin to a miasma that had been lurking at the bottom.

Capture the imperial capital of Odin; steal away the young emperor. It was he who succeeded in doing that whose deeds would be the greatest and most highly distinguished in this civil war. The accomplishments of the one who lured Reinhard away to Gaiesburg would be lost in the glare of such an outstanding achievement, like asteroids passing in front of a star.

It went without saying that whoever marked the most distinguished accomplishments in the war would have the loudest voice in the postwar order. Most importantly, by becoming the emperor's protector, one made an ally—even if only as a formality—of the highest authority in the empire, which would make it possible to monopolize position and power by invoking imperial decree.

Commander of the second force.

The shortest route to ultimate power.

Which must not be handed to anyone else.

In the eyes of Duke von Braunschweig and Marquis von Littenheim, there arose glares that shone like layers of oil on water.

Already, the discussion had moved away from strategy and tactics, and shifted to the dimension of political gamesmanship. They had barely looked at the forest, but already they were appraising the value of its black sables' furs.

Merkatz had known this would happen. That was why he had abandoned this strategy in his mind, even though it might appear to be highly effective from a purely military point of view. It was a plan that could only be brought to fruition through highly unified will and organization. An unshakable, mutual trust between the commander of the main force and the commander of the secondary force must not be lacking.

And that did not exist in the military of the noble confederacy. That was exactly why Marquis von Lohengramm could feel so free to leave Odin lightly defended.

From the start, the noble confederation had been built on a foundation of hatred toward Reinhard for besting his betters. No consensus had been established on the question of who would inherit Reinhard's position and authority should he be brought down. It was an easy thing to cause a crack in their solidarity.

And now Staden had caused exactly such a crack before the fighting had even started. In terms of results, it could be said he had just done the enemy an enormous favor. Now their phony solidarity had yielded its seat to raw avarice. Self-centered passions were rising like a volcano's sulfurous fumes from Duke von Braunschweig, Marquis von Littenheim, and the other aristocrats, and Merkatz was taken with the feeling that he was suffocating.

Could he win against Reinhard like this?

And even if he could—for whose sake would he be winning?

II

For Merkatz, the word "operation" thereafter came to mean a futile choice between compromise and sticking to his guns while knowing full well he would be ignored.

At the time when he became commander in chief of the actual combat forces, the young aristocrats, eager for battle, had greeted him with a spirit of welcome, but the mood soon soured. Unused to being ordered around by others, they had found it extremely difficult—albeit not impossible—to hold their own egos in check. The older ones should have been guided by good sense equivalent to their years, but they were apt to stir up the radicalism of the youths in order to use it to their own advantage.

The first thing that Merkatz was forced to compromise on was sending out a vanguard under the command of Staden, who clearly viewed him as a competitor. Many young aristocrats, eager to quench their thirst for battle, were drawn in by his words:

“First, I’d like to test their mettle in combat.”

Do you also need to go out and get your nose bloodied? Merkatz thought. It wasn’t that, though; they needed to do it in order to be convinced for themselves.

The young aristocrats didn’t even try to hide the fact that they were preparing for battle, so information regarding the launch of the “brigand force” had reached even Reinhard’s desk.

“Call Mittermeier up here.”

When Admiral Wolfgang Mittermeier, rather small of build though quite agile in appearance, appeared before him, Reinhard asked: “I understand you learned tactical theory under Staden when you were in officers’ school.”

“I did, milord. If there’s anything the matter—”

“There’s word that Staden is leading the first wave of the noble—*brigand*—forces. It seems they intend to try their luck and go a round with us.”

“Ah, so it’s started at last,” the bold young admiral said calmly.

“How about it? Can you beat him?”

The hint of a smile that rose up in Mittermeier’s eyes was keen and indomitable.

“Instructor Staden had a wealth of knowledge, but when fact and theory were at odds, his tendency was to give priority to theory. As students, we used to badmouth him, calling him ‘Theory-Weary Staden’.”

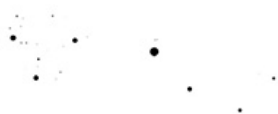
“Very well, then. Here are your orders: lead your fleet out toward the Artena Stellar Region, and meet your former instructor there. In five days, I’ll come as well. You may engage him in battle before then or strengthen our defenses and wait. I leave full operational control to you.”

“Yes, sir!”

Mittermeier bowed and left the bridge of the flagship *Brünhild* with a definite spring in his step. Whatever else might be said, it was a warrior’s honor to stand at the head of the attack.

It was April 19, in the year 488 of the imperial calendar and 797 of the SE calendar.

This was how what came to be known as the Lippstadt War commenced.



The sixteen thousand-ship fleet led by Staden and the fifteen thousand-ship fleet led by Mittermeier drew near to one another, each choosing the shortest route toward its opponent’s home territory. The goal of this skirmish lay not in the seizure of some strategic location, but rather in the psychological effect—if any—of winning the first battle and learning something of the enemy’s tactical capabilities.

The two forces came face-to-face in interstellar space near the Artena system.

However, Mittermeier positioned six million fusion mines in front of his own forces to block the enemy's path of attack, regrouped his fleet into a spherical formation, and then idled in place. A day went by, and then another, but he would not budge from that position.

Staden grew suspicious and fearful. Mittermeier's keen intellect and swift ferocity had earned him the nickname of "Gale Wolf." He had been given the honor of leading the vanguard. Yet here he was, just shoring up defenses while making no move to attack. What was Mittermeier up to? He had to be planning something—Staden couldn't imagine it otherwise. But what was he planning?

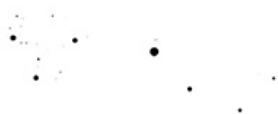
This was how Staden also halted his advance.

As Staden was grappling with the situation, what he found most frustrating were the young aristocrats under his command. Beneficiaries since birth of countless privileges, they had walked through life on the feet of others, as it were, all but free of any impediment, and had grown up looking down on those who did not possess privilege themselves—to them, a desire was a thing to be realized without effort. If they decided they wanted to win, they should simply win. Staden's behavior looked more craven than cautious to them, and there were even those among them who said so openly. They were possessed of a morbidly obese self-respect and were completely insensitive to the feelings of others.

With soothing words and flattery, Staden continued to dissuade them from reckless action, even as he bore the sting of their abuses. This required no small effort.

"It should be just about time now. Shall we pay Instructor Staden back for all his help years ago?"

It was near the end of the third day that Mittermeier gave orders to his men.



A comm officer appeared before Staden to report that they had intercepted a transmission from Mittermeier's fleet. Analysis of the audio had revealed that while Mittermeier was buying time by not attacking, Marquis von Lohengramm's main force was growing nearer by the hour. Mittermeier planned to rendezvous with them, then launch an all-out assault with overwhelming numerical superiority.

Did Mittermeier leak that intentionally? Staden wondered. However: *If that intelligence is correct, I can understand why Mittermeier would take a firm defensive position and not try to attack. If that's the case, could Mittermeier have deliberately leaked correct information?*

Staden was perplexed. He could no longer see consistency in Mittermeier's actions. Nevertheless, he gave orders to put the fleet on heightened alert, taking into consideration the threat of a sneak attack.

The indignation of the young nobles was right on the verge of exploding. What passivity! What indecisiveness! Wasn't the whole point of coming to this stellar region to cross swords with the enemy, test their mettle, and crush their morale? "We can't rely on our commander any further," they said. "All we can depend on

is ourselves.”

The young nobles took counsel with one another, arrived at a consensus, and then went to Staden to demand he launch an attack. Their demands sounded very close to threats. If he refused, they might well plunge the fleet into disorderly combat anyway, after throwing him in the brig.

At last, Staden gave in and authorized the attack. However, to try and control the young nobles insofar as it was possible, he did provide them with a battle plan. The entire force was to split toward starboard and port in order to detour around the minefield. After the port wing had clashed head-on with Mittermeier's force, the starboard wing would circle around to the enemy's rear, attack them on their flank and back side, and drive them into the minefield. By Staden's standards, it was a rather sloppy plan, but it was clear to see that anything too elaborate would leave his comrades unable to act well in concert.

Staden was beginning to have regrets about taking charge of a force like this. However, there was nothing to do at this point except destroy Mittermeier as swiftly as possible, then pull back out before Reinhard's main force arrived. He took personal command of the port wing of his regiment, gave command of the starboard wing to a young nobleman named Count Hildesheim, and commenced the operation.

Count Hildesheim hurried off with his fleet. Anxious to make a name for himself, he didn't even try to suppress his boiling aggression. Eight thousand vessels did head off in the same direction, but they were unable to maintain an orderly formation as a group.

By that time, Mittermeier's forces had of course moved away from their original position. They had relocated to a point far outside of the minefield. Viewed from directly overhead, this placed Hildesheim's forces *between* the minefield and Mittermeier's force.

“Energy waves and multiple missiles approaching from three o'clock!”

As panic was seizing operators aboard every ship in the Hildesheim force, there came a flash of white light from the first fusion explosion. Before it had time to fade, the second and third explosions followed. Energy beams, fusion missiles, and huge shells launched by rail guns swarmed in with a swiftness that left no spare time for anyone to take in what was happening and enveloped the cosmos in rainbow-hued beams. When the beams vanished, everything had returned to nothingness. Human bodies, incinerated or rent asunder, had been returned to their component atoms, which mingled with the interstellar dust. Perhaps in a few billion years that mixture might form the nucleus of a newborn star.

Count Hildesheim was killed in action before he himself could realize it. He was likely the first of the highborn to lose his life in the civil war.

After crushing the desperate and disorganized counterattack of the Hildesheim force, Mittermeier had his fleet continue to advance full speed ahead. This was so as to circle clockwise around the minefield and attack Staden's main force from the rear. Attacking the back side of an enemy force reduced by half would position him well for certain victory. And who but the Gale Wolf could have done so?

When Reinhard's main fleet arrived, the Battle of Artena was already over. Mittermeier, praised by Reinhard for his superlative use of force strength, apologized for letting Staden slip through his fingers, then added with a smile that it was going to be a huge pain to recover all the mines he had used to set the playing field.

III

While elements within both the empire and the alliance were still trying to outwit or murder one another, or both, the trading state known as the Phezzan Land Dominion was bursting with industrious energy. As it continued to evade the horrors and tragedies of the war, the workings of its greedy economy were sucking up every last bit of profit to be gained from it. To all of the factions they were selling all manner of merchandise—weapons, foodstuffs, ores, military uniforms, intelligence, and occasionally people in the form of mercenaries. They were striving to monopolize all the wealth in the universe.

De la Court, located not far from the capital's spaceport, was a bar where independent merchants gathered—the kind who traveled all over the galaxy without an asset to their names except a single spaceship and a handful of clever businessmen.

Boris Konev, age twenty-eight, was one such free merchant and captain of the merchant ship *Beryozka*. Although he had spirit enough for several men, he was still known generally only as a small-time merchant. He was enjoying a black beer during his scant free time when another independent merchant of his acquaintance called out to him.

After exchanging two or three pleasantries, the merchant said, "By the way, I've heard a strange rumor."

"Most rumors are strange."

Konev finished off his black beer and asked him about the rumor.

"Well, basically, His Excellency, Landesherr Rubinsky, has apparently got something really big in the works."

"That chrome dome?"

The face of Rubinsky sketched itself in the back of Konev's mind, a far cry indeed from anything pure or refined, and while he listened to the other man tell his story, he became unable to suppress an ironic smirk.

"So he makes the two great powers—the empire and the alliance—wipe each other out, and then Phezzan comes along and picks up the pieces. That's crazy, you know."

"Well, I said it was a strange rumor, didn't I? Don't laugh like that—I'm not the one who suggested it."

"Honestly, I wonder who does come up with that kind of thing."

Konev reached out his hand for another black beer, unaware of the grimace on one side of his mouth. As far as heuristics went, "A rumor is strange, therefore it

lacks credence” was not always useful. They said Rubinsky had always been a competent leader, but it was always possible that he was really a megalomaniac and nobody knew about it or that someday he might become mentally unstable.

Phezzen was a parasite, the young Konev believed. Without a host, it couldn't live. If its hosts, the empire and the alliance, were to be destroyed, Phezzen would wilt and die itself. It shouldn't mess around with things it wasn't good at, such as military affairs and politics.

“Anyway,” Konev said, deciding to change the subject, “do you know what your next job's gonna be?”

“Yeah, get this: I'm transporting *thirty thousand* members of some kind of Earth religion. Apparently, they're on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.”

“Holy Land?”

“They mean Earth.”

“Huh. So Earth is the Holy Land?” The young captain laughed mockingly.

For him, religions and gods were nothing more than fodder for jokes—can an all-powerful god make a woman who won't listen to him? If he can't, then he's not all-powerful, but if he does and then can't make her listen, well, he's not all-powerful in that case either ...

Even so, it was a fact that the Terraist faith was swelling its membership with a surprising energy. As for Konev, he couldn't judge whether this was a positive or a negative.

After draining his second beer, Konev parted from his acquaintance, left the bar, and headed for the spaceport building, where he was allotted a small office.

“Officer Marinesk, what's my next job?”

Officer Marinesk was only four years older than the spaceship captain, although the difference looked more like ten.

Although he was still young, Marinesk had lost half his hair, was girded with unnecessary flab, and had a face lacking in good cheer and generosity—nothing could wipe away the impression he gave of a middle-aged man exhausted by life. However, without this man's reliable office and accounting skills, the free merchant ship *Beryozka* would undoubtedly have been sold off to some big capitalist venture long ago.

“This time, the cargo is human.”

“The lovely young daughter of some billionaire?”

That was more a wish than a question.

“A group of pilgrims bound for Earth.”

An awkward silence followed.

His eyebrows drew together as he took the paperwork and flipped through its pages, and at last he shut the binder sullenly.

“If we go to a place like Earth, won't the ship be empty on the way back? There's not a speck of resources still left on that planet.”

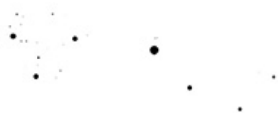
“Just take on another group of pilgrims returning from Earth. I got them to pay their fares up front. Unless I make payments to three different vendors by tomorrow, *Beryozka* will be this close to the auction block.”

The young captain tsked and wondered aloud on what planet this so-called war boom was actually happening. Just once, he'd like to go flying from system to system, holds packed tight with liquid radium or raw diamonds, and then decorate his cabin with a trophy reading THIS YEAR'S WINNER OF THE SINBAD

AWARD.

Reliability, however, was the clothing that Marinesk wore each day, and, naturally, to hear him tell it, it was when one abandoned those dreams of making a fortune overnight that the path toward becoming a truly great merchant opened up.

In any case, Konev was in no position to be picky about the jobs he took. After all, he had not only himself but also his twenty-member crew to feed.



Five days out from Phezzan's primary port, *Beryozka* encountered a huge fleet of tens of thousands of vessels. Space was vast, but the regions that could be used as shipping lanes were limited, so it was not an unthinkable sort of coincidence. By the time Konev and his crew received a transmission saying, "Stop your vessel. If you fail to comply, we will attack," they were already surrounded. They could only pray that the commander was someone who could be reasoned with. If he wasn't, there was even the danger that they could be shot on suspicion of spying.

This was a fleet operating far apart from Reinhard, quelling resistance among the frontier stellar regions. Its commander was Siegfried Kircheis.

The face that appeared on the comm screen wore a mild expression, so, feeling relieved, Konev explained the situation.

"As you can see, the people I have with me are pilgrims. They aren't soldiers. They're mainly old folks, women, and children. I'll understand if you want to board us and see for yourself, but ..."

"No, there'll be no need for that," Kircheis said, shaking his head. There was sympathy in the blue eyes that gazed at the pilgrims standing near Konev. They certainly seemed poor. Sleeping in simple beds installed within the cargo vessel and taking their three meals from portable rations they had brought with them, they were enduring a journey that required a month just to get to their destination. Using a cargo vessel cost only a tenth of what a passenger ship would have. Legally, however, they were treated as cargo, and even in the event of an accident, compensation could not be paid for loss of life.

"Are you lacking anything in terms of foodstuffs or medical supplies?" Kircheis said, turning toward an elder of the pilgrim band. The old man nodded and answered that they were short of some things, such as milk for infants, artificial protein, and detergent for washing clothes. Kircheis gave instructions to his subordinate, Captain Horst Sinzer, that supplies should be sent over from the regiment's stores.

To the old man's stammered words of thanks, Kircheis smiled and told him to take care, and then cut off the transmission. Marinesk, impressed, was rubbing his palm back and forth across his bald scalp.

"He's a really nice man, that Admiral Kircheis."

"Yeah, a shame, isn't it?"

"Huh? What's a shame?"

"Nice people don't live long, especially in times like these."

Konev turned to look at Marinesk, but since he didn't answer, he walked back toward his own seat.

Watching him from behind as he walked away, the office chief shook his head. He was thinking, *If only our captain didn't feel compelled to spout cool-sounding lines like that at inappropriate times ...*

It was still a long, long way to Earth.

IV

Rentenberg Fortress, which Duke von Braunschweig had at first assumed would be his third military stronghold, occupied an asteroid in the Freya system. While it was no rival for Iserlohn in sheer scale, Rentenberg still had the capacity to hold soldiers by the millions and more than ten thousand ships, and was equipped for a wide variety of functions including combat, communications, resupply, and maintenance and repair. It also served as a hospital. As such, it was an important facility for the military of the aristocratic confederation.

Defeated by Mittermeier and set to flight by Reinhard's main force, Staden, defended by the remnant of his forces, just barely escaped to this fortress, and there he rested his wounded body and spirit.

Had that been all, Reinhard might have ignored this fortress like a pebble by the roadside. However, Rentenberg housed a control center for various reconnaissance satellites and spaceborne radar devices, as well as an FTL transmission center, a communications jamming system, spaceship repair facilities, and more. Further, a large number of soldiers had been stationed there since before the battle had commenced. If he ignored it and drove on ahead, there was the danger that squirming insects might make designs upon his backside. Poisonous sprouts should be plucked early.

"We'll assemble our full force and capture Rentenberg," Reinhard decided. He summoned the admirals to the bridge of his flagship *Brünhild* and, with cross-sectional and planar maps of the fortress displayed on the screen, gave each of them their orders.

When he had taken the Ministry of Military Affairs on Odin, a vast number of top secret documents had also fallen into Reinhard's hands. Blueprints for Rentenberg Fortress had been among them. Its strengths and its weaknesses were all in Reinhard's hand, and the enemy had had no time to shore up its vulnerabilities.

The one problem in taking it was Corridor Six. The fortress had been built by hollowing out an asteroid, and at its center was a fusion reactor that supplied energy to the entire facility. Corridor Six formed the shortest route between the outer wall and the fusion reactor, and if they could get through it and capture the reactor, they would have the power of life and death over the fortress. However, concentrating their firepower invited the danger of a secondary explosion caused by a direct hit on the reactor core.

That being the case, the only way through was hand-to-hand combat.

Three days later, Reinhard's forces, having closed in on Rentenberg Fortress, launched an all-out attack. Von Reuentahl and Mittermeier were put in charge of combat operations.

Following close on the heels of the first exchange of cannon fire, the fleet

stationed there facing out of the fortress, challenging Reinhard's fleet in ship-to-ship combat. Reinhard's forces, however, blocked their way with a long wall of battleships that boasted superior firepower and attacked them on both flanks with high-speed cruisers. Crisscrossing missiles and energy beams wove a web of death, and chained fireballs crafted works of exquisite jewelry in the black void.

After less than an hour of combat, the enemy, reduced to half its original force strength, retreated into the fortress. Von Reuentahl and Mittermeier followed hot on their heels, and while the fortress gunners' timing was off—they were fearful of shooting allies—they ducked into a blind spot of the giant cannons whose presence they had calculated from the blueprints.

Military engineers dressed in space suits broke through the wall using a laser-triggered hydrogen bomb, at which point an assault landing craft moving in sync with the fortress's rotation attached itself and disgorged row after row of infantry in power armor. Mittermeier and von Reuentahl had created a temporary command center inside that one ship attached to the fortress wall and, observing via surveillance camera the state of the combat, carried out command of the operation from the front line.

It was thought that the fortress's fall would be only a matter of time. However, both of the young admirals were very nervous. This was because they knew that the man commanding the defense of Corridor Six was Ofresser, Commissioner of the Armored Grenadier Corps.

Senior Admiral Ofresser was a huge man in his late forties, with firm, powerful muscles enveloping a sturdy frame. Like a bull when challenged by a matador, he was a man bursting with both physical power and the will to use it.

Around his left cheekbone there was a vivid purple scar. It was a symbol of what a ferocious admiral he was. Once, when in battle with the forces of the Free Planets Alliance, an enemy soldier had shot him with a laser, cutting through skin, muscle, and even a part of his skull. Of course, he had repaid that soldier for the favor—by crushing his skull with one swing of his giant tomahawk battle-ax.

The tomahawks used in hand-to-hand combat were made using diamond-hard carbon crystals. The standard type had a length of eighty-five centimeters, weighed six kilograms, and was swung with one hand. Ofresser's ax, however, was 150 centimeters long, weighed 9.5 kilograms, and was wielded with both hands. When a weapon of this gigantic size was combined with Ofresser's outstanding strength and fighting prowess, its destructive power became unimaginable. Even if helmets and power armor could withstand one of his blows, the human inside could not. Even if the soldier still lived within the armored suit, a broken breastbone and ruptured organs would rob him of the capacity to keep fighting.

"If you meet Ofresser in a one-on-one fight, what will you do?" said von Reuentahl.

"Run for my life," replied Mittermeier.

"I feel the same way. A man like that must have been born for the sole purpose of pounding people to death."

In everything from marksmanship to hand-to-hand combat, both of the young admirals were first-rate warriors, but they knew just how inhuman the ferocity of Ofresser was. Some would surely say there was no shame in fleeing an opponent

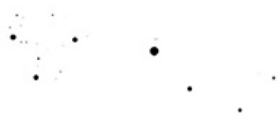
like him—and failure to recognize that was either impetuous or idiotic.

That said, present circumstances did not allow them to turn to the men and say, “We really don’t mind if you run away from him.” They had to take Corridor Six without destroying it. Power armor was equipped with air filters, so even if they gassed the halls, it would have no effect. Hand to hand was the only way.

There in Corridor Six, the soldiers of Reinhard’s forces were likely to become a river of blood choked with corpses, thanks to Ofresser and his squadron. An order had to be given, which even for Mittermeier, and even for von Reuentahl, was a little depressing:

“No matter the cost, secure Corridor Six.”

In this manner, the eruption in Corridor Six of combat primitive and brutal became inevitable.



Charge and retreat.

During the space of eight hours, Reinhard’s armored grenadiers charged nine times into Corridor Six and nine times were beaten back.

Among the high-ranking officers of the imperial military, including both pro- and anti-Reinhard factions, no man had killed as many people with his own hands as Ofresser. Born a low-ranking aristocrat, this man had reached the highest echelons of the imperial military not through political power, and not through tactical wizardry, but simply through the sheer amount of rebel blood he had spilled. This man had flooded Corridor Six with the gaseous explosive known as Seffl particles, denying his opponents, and his allies, the use of even light firearms. Determinedly using only his body and his physical strength, he kept on fighting to send one more, just *one more* opponent, to death.

His tomahawk, as though making its own the gruesome desires of its owner, smashed the bodies of Reinhard’s men, reducing them to blood-splattered chunks of meat.

Both Mittermeier and von Reuentahl were men far removed from what might be called squeamishness. Even they, however, could not help averting their eyes from the scene as a soldier with one leg chopped off at the knee was trying desperately to drag himself away with both hands, and Ofresser simply walked up to him and smashed in his head with his giant, blood-fouled tomahawk.

In Ofresser’s eyes, just visible through his full-face helmet, there rippled waves of brutal laughter. What held Mittermeier and von Reuentahl back from unequivocal praise of the man was that brutality, which transcended the bounds of bravery, inspiring physiological reactions of disgust.

Regardless of how they felt about him, it was an unassailable fact that the mission had stalled, with Corridor Six still unclaimed because of this lone, bestial man. Their anger toward Ofresser was doubled by that fact.

“We can’t let that monster live,” Mittermeier said in a low voice. Yet in spite of his tone and the intense look in his eyes, his words were somehow lacking in punch. The ability to lead massive fleets of ships through the vastness of space

put these two men in the top class of the whole human race, yet with conditions as they were and an environment this limiting, they felt helpless in the face of Ofresser's primitive fighting spirit and brute strength.

And yet, what was it that was holding Ofresser and his team physically and mentally together in the face of Reinhard's forces' repeated waves of attack? They kept on fighting and repelling them, even with no fresh troops to relieve them.

Normally, it would be unthinkable to fight uninterrupted in power armor for as long a period as eight hours.

Power armor was completely insulated, and even the absolute zero cold of outer space would have no effect on the human inside. But by the same token, the heat released by the human body had nowhere to go, so a soldier in the hard-to-endure temperatures of a suit used too long would very quickly lose his physical strength. A temperature-control device small enough to pose no obstacle to combat could just barely lower the temperature to 7 or 8 degrees centigrade lower than that of the human body.

So even driven mad with hatred and hostility toward Reinhard, the high temperature and various other unpleasant elements—sweat, itchiness, excretory troubles, feelings of despair—should have become unbearable after two hours. For them to have held out for eight ...

"They're using drugs."

There was no other conclusion. It was only by using stimulants to keep themselves excited and awake that they could perform this superhuman labor. Just then, there was a transmission from Reinhard asking for a report on the status of the battle, and both of them briefly pulled back from the front line of the fight.

"Ofresser is a hero," Reinhard opined with a hint of a cold smile after hearing their report. "But he's a hero of the Stone Age."

He was not going to dress down his two humiliated admirals, though.

"Leaving him alive serves no purpose, and most importantly, survival is not something that man is wishing for himself. Kill him as spectacularly as you are able."

"Wait just a moment," a third voice cut in. It was the chief of staff, von Oberstein. "I'd like to take him alive. Allow me to show Your Excellency how he may be of use."

"You think that a man that obstinate could be of use to me?"

"It's not a matter of his being willing."

Reinhard's brows drew together at those words.

"Brainwash him, you mean?" Reinhard could not muster favorable feelings toward chemical or neuro-electrical brainwashing.

His chief of staff only smiled and for a moment said not a word. "I'll do nothing so *uncouth* as that," von Oberstein said at last. "Please, just leave everything to me. Then you can watch as I sow a seed of mutual distrust among the nobles ..."

"Very well, then, I leave it in your hands."

As Reinhard spoke, a report came in from a communications officer.

Ofresser, the officer said, had appeared on the comm screen. At the news that he was triumphantly shouting something, Reinhard had him patch the feed through to his viewscreen.

"Is the golden brat brave enough to look me in the eye—even through a

viewscreen?”

Ofresser was still wearing the helmet and took up the whole of the screen with his huge frame. His armor was darkly stained with human blood, and there were even bits of flesh stuck to it here and there. Around Reinhard, there were growls of anger and gasps of fear.

That was how the bestial giant looked as he began hurling insults at Reinhard through his armor’s comm system. After calling him a traitor who had trampled on the favor of the imperial family, a coward, an immoral monster, and an inexperienced whelp who had just gotten lucky, he added, “And you and your sister both used sex to deceive our prior emperor—”

It was in that instant that the cool reason in Reinhard’s graceful features went flying to the wayside, yielding its seat to an explosive anger. Lightning flashed in those ice-blue eyes, and the sound of grinding teeth slipped from between his finely shaped lips.

“Von Reuentahl! Mittermeier!”

“Sir!”

“Drag that obscene oaf before me. Alive. Even if you have to rip off his arms and his legs, *do not kill him*. I am going to tear his filthy mouth to shreds with my own two hands!”

The two admirals exchanged a glance. That was going to be a tall order. Too late, they realized for certain that Reinhard was just another creature of emotion.

V

The grenadiers of Reinhard’s force were about to assay their tenth charge. A barricade of corpses had been erected in their way, and Ofresser’s squadron, tipsy under the influence of the drugs and the bloodshed, glared at the enemy with glistening eyes.

“If you’re gonna come, you cowardly mice, then hurry up and come!”

His ferocious cries tore through the air.

“I’m gonna throw your bodies in a pot and make me a big mess of fricassee! Though I can imagine how bad the meat from the lowly birthed will taste. Still, you can’t be picky on the battlefield.”

“Barbarian,” von Reuentahl spat. “Like the supreme commander said, he’s a hero from the Stone Age. He was just born twenty thousand years too late.”

“And that means we’re going to have a pretty rough time of it twenty thousand years later,” Mittermeier added bitterly. He summoned his aide and ordered him to bring two suits of power armor.

“Admiral, you’re not both thinking of facing him yourselves?!”

“We’re going to be the bait,” said von Reuentahl. “That makes a certain trap more complete ... How are preparations coming for your charge?”

“I think we’re just about ready, sir. But there’s nothing Your Excellencies need do yourselves.”

“The two of us are both full admirals,” said von Reuentahl. “That beast Ofresser’s a senior admiral. It would be nice if that made things even.”

How would Ofresser react when Mittermeier and von Reuentahl appeared together before him? Judging by his apparent state of mind, there should be no way he would let anyone else have such valuable prey. It was clear he would

come running forward eager for single combat—a part of humanity’s heritage handed down since the Stone Age.

For their trick to succeed, bait was essential, and that bait had to be delicious.

If it were Reinhard himself, the conditions would be perfect, but as that might actually end up making the mechanism a little too obvious, it was the two of them who were most appropriate.

They got into their power armor, and as soon as they stepped into the corridor, excited whispers escaped from among Ofresser’s men. As the bravery of von Reuentahl and Mittermeier was widely known, there would be great honor for the man who took their lives. After silencing them, the giant glared at the two admirals.

“He thinks you can win by coming at me together? Is that the extent of the brat’s wit?”

“We won’t ever know unless we try,” Mittermeier shot back. Taking that as a disrespectful challenge, Ofresser stepped over the barricade of dead bodies and came out to approach them. He walked with large strides. Even through his armor, the energy of his ferocious desire to kill overwhelmed the place. Eyes shining with bloodthirstiness, he sprang toward the two men—

And in that instant, Ofresser’s towering form grew *shorter*. Although his stature came to nearly 200 centimeters, his head was suddenly far lower than that of the 184-centimeter von Reuentahl or the 172-centimeter Mittermeier. Enemy and ally alike swallowed their breath as if they had just witnessed magic. Could what they had seen have really just happened?

The floor had subsided beneath him. Ofresser had sunk into the floor up to his chest, and his arms had just barely stopped him from sinking farther. The two-handed tomahawk that was his other self had fallen to the floor about one meter away.

It was a pitfall, a hole gouged out of a floor made from compound crystalline fibers. Or more precisely, irradiation by inverted populations of hydrogen and fluoride had been carried out over a period of three hours from the level underneath the sixth corridor, weakening the fibers’ molecular bonds so they could not withstand the shock of Ofresser’s weight and actions.

Mittermeier leapt forward and kicked the tomahawk out of Ofresser’s reach. Ofresser’s face, stunned at this unexpected reversal, turned a reddish purple inside his helmet as he realized his circumstances.

“We have Ofresser!” shouted von Reuentahl. “And we’ve no use for the rest of them. All armored grenadiers: charge!”

Von Reuentahl picked up the tomahawk that his colleague had kicked away and favored his prey with a cold smile.

“I thought we’d need a trap to catch a wild beast, and you’ve fallen into it splendidly. A cheap trap that no one but you would get caught in.”

“Coward!”

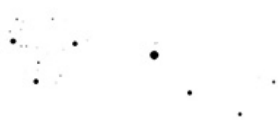
“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

A stream of charging soldiers brushed against his side as they passed.

Having lost their commander, Ofresser’s men drew back from the charge of Reinhard’s invigorated forces. Perhaps when they lost their daring commander their fighting spirit had dried up like a puddle under the blazing sun.

Reinhard's vengefully rampaging forces closed in on Ofresser's men and, with swings of their tomahawk battle-axes, set to the slaughter. Twice, waves of a counterattack rolled against them, and twice, they crushed them.

Corridor Six had been secured—and painted red.



Bound with two sets of handcuffs, wearing an electric helmet used in executions, and with as many as a dozen guns pointed at him, Ofresser was dragged in front of the comm screen.

Faced with the gleaming flames of Reinhard's fury and hatred, as well as nearly certain death, Ofresser kept his head raised haughtily. Whatever the man's shortcomings, it was certain that he was no coward.

However, the comm screen was shut down right away. On the flagship *Brünhild*, the chief of staff was trying to change his commander's mind.

"Killing him is easy, but Ofresser has no fear of death. Not only that, killing him now would elevate his reputation, make him an indomitable hero—a martyr for the Goldenbaum Dynasty. Surely that's not what you wish."

Reinhard didn't answer.

The storm that was raging inside him was clear to see in his ice-blue eyes. At last, his tightly clenched lips parted as he pushed out a brief question.

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Send him back to the nobles' home base. Unharméd, of course."

"Ridiculous!"

It was Mittermeier who had shouted. His young countenance was flushed with anger and alarm.

"After all that hard work ... after letting all those soldiers die, we finally caught that wild animal! And you say you're going to set him free? No matter how generously he might be treated, that tomahawk of his will still spill a lot of our people's blood on the next battlefield. You can bet on it—not that there's anything to be gained even if you win that bet. I acknowledge no reason to keep him alive. We should execute him immediately."

"Agreed," said von Reuentahl, succinctly but in a strong tone of voice. What was von Oberstein doing, turning an untamable beast loose in the field? He demanded that very answer, but the chief of staff remained unmoved.

"When the nobles see Ofresser returned unharméd, what do you think they'll believe?" he said. "They've always been a suspicious lot—and we have executed sixteen of the top leaders among Ofresser's subordinates, scenes of which even the nobles have been made aware of by FTL. If Ofresser returns, alone and unharméd, after that ..."

"All right," Reinhard said, cutting off von Oberstein. The light in his eyes was changing to that of fierce but suppressed emotion. He looked at his two hardworking and dissatisfied subordinates. "You have to recognize that, too. I want to let von Oberstein handle this. Any objections?"

"None, milord. As Your Excellency wishes."

von Reuentahl and Mittermeier answered as one. They, too, had realized what von Oberstein intended. The slight bitterness in their expressions was probably because it wasn't to their tastes.

Ofresser was released, and even given a shuttle with FTL capability. Modest words of gratitude were not exactly forthcoming from his lips, but it was a fact that he was dumbfounded. Head tilted in bewilderment, he boarded the shuttle and departed the fortress.

Sixteen of Ofresser's colleagues and subordinates had been publicly disposed of by firing squad. Staden had been taken prisoner still lying in his hospital bed. The young imperial marshal had seen no need to meet with him.

VI

While Ofresser had not set his hopes so high as to expect a hero's welcome and cheers of adulation, the circumstances that greeted him upon his arrival at the confederated military's home base of Gaiesburg were nonetheless outside his expectations.

When he sent the transmission telling of his safe return, the comm officer had reacted with utter shock, and when the shuttle put into port, it was immediately surrounded—not by beautiful women carrying bouquets of flowers, but by heavily armed soldiers.

"And you would be Senior Admiral Ofresser, who fought so valiantly at Rentenberg?" The man speaking in these affected tones was Commodore Ansbach, architect of the plan to escape Odin and said to be Duke von Braunschweig's right-hand man.

"Can't you tell by looking?" Ofresser said, irritated.

"I'm only making sure. Our leader awaits, so please, come this way."

From there, the hero of Rentenberg was conducted to a wide and spacious auditorium. Rows of officers and soldiers who were seated there turned their gazes toward him, but there was no warmth to be found in any of their eyes.

At the top of the steps leading up to the stage was a gorgeously fashioned chair, in which Duke von Braunschweig was sitting. He wore a haughty demeanor, although there was also something awkward about it, as though he were some sort of emperor in training.

"It's good to see you've returned alive and well, Ofresser." The tone was clearly one reserved for interrogations. "Those who were chief among your subordinates have, to the last man, been publicly executed. So why have you alone returned here alive?"

"Executed?"

Ofresser's mouth fell open wide. His jaws were filled with false teeth; just like the scar on his cheek, they were proof of a fighter who had lived through the purgatory of hand-to-hand combat. Angry shouts mingled with mocking sarcasm hit the face of the dumbfounded, slack-jawed senior admiral.

"You boneheaded oaf! Take a look at this!"

Video footage began to play on a screen on the wall. Ofresser gave a low growl. Familiar faces were lined up in a row. This was the scene of their public execution by Reinhard's forces at Rentenberg Fortress. Overwhelming emotions of terror and defeat showed in those faces—faces that one by one became empty

holes in the instant the laser beams pierced their brains.

"How about it, Ofresser? Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

But Ofresser was still speechless.

"I think that you alone have returned to us alive because you've betrayed us and sold your conscience to the golden brat. Shameless dog! What did you promise him? To bring him my head?"

Across Ofresser's craggy countenance, there suddenly spread an expression of fury and understanding, and he opened his mouth once again.

"A trap! This is a trap! You idiots! Can't you see that?"

It was less a cry than a roar. The officers and soldiers who had been forming a human wall around him jumped backward as though pressed by some unseen energy. Several hands reflexively reached for the blasters on their belts.

"Shoot him!" cried von Braunschweig. "Shoot him dead!"

That order summoned chaos instead of calm. Although blasters were quickly drawn, everyone knew the danger of firing in the middle of a crowd.

The flash of a monstrous fist caught one of the soldiers on the jaw. With a grotesque sound, his lower jaw broke, and the soldier went flying through the air.

The rampaging giant roared the words "This is a trap!" again and again as he charged toward Duke von Braunschweig, who was seated at the top of the stairs. Even if he had only meant to get the man to listen, it certainly didn't look that way to others. Commodore Ansbach's orders rang out, and a few dozen soldiers moved to stand between the duke and Ofresser. Blocking his way forward, they swung the barrels of their laser rifles down on the bare-handed giant. It was a literal beatdown. Skin split, blood splattered, and the sounds of new depression fractures rang out. A normal man would have collapsed, or possibly even died on the spot. But Ofresser's charge wasn't even slowed. Knocked off their feet, crying out in pain, soldiers tumbled down the stairs in an avalanche.

Spitting saliva mixed with blood onto the floor, Commodore Ansbach got back to his feet. He had been one of the ones knocked down. Smoothing his disheveled hair with one hand, he drew his blaster with the other.

The commodore approached Ofresser, steadying his breathing, though there was no unsteadiness in his footsteps. The senior admiral-turned-blood-splattered colossus leveled the dull light of his gaze upon this new enemy, and then, with a growl, reached out for him with thick, massive arms. With a light backstep, the commodore dodged out of the way, then quickly pressed the barrel of his sidearm against his opponent's ear. He pulled the trigger.

Accompanied by a flash of light, blood burst out from the ear on the other side of Ofresser's head.

Rippling convulsions ran through Ofresser's huge form. When they subsided, that huge, lifeless mass of muscle stood unmoving for a few seconds, as though supported by the hands of some unseen god, but at last fell forward onto the stairs. When his forehead struck the corner of a step, a hollow sound rang out, the final chord of a gruesome capriccio. As they surrounded the body, no one said a word for a time.

"That traitor!"

At last Duke von Braunschweig began slinging invective in a loud voice, though a thin veil of terror yet clung to his face.

"He gave himself away in the end—how dare that rabid dog try to harm me ..."

Commodore Ansbach cleared his throat. “So you say, but did he really intend to betray us?”

“It’s a little late to be asking that. If that’s what you think, why did you shoot him?”

Ansbach shook his head, again messing up his just-straightened hair.

“That was to protect the life of Your Excellency the Duke. Still, it’s possible, isn’t it, that he rampaged out of shock at finding himself under suspicion and because he realized—as he himself said—that he was caught in a trap.”

“Possibly. But what of it if he did? He’s dead now, and will never carry a tomahawk again. Even if he did it because he’d betrayed us, even if he was trying to do me harm, drawing distinctions at this point is meaningless.”

“Understood. In that case, then, how do you wish to explain this incident? I mean, we’re talking about Senior Admiral Ofresser’s cause of death ...”

A series of riots would, to the order and discipline of the confederated noble military, have been highly ignominious, and so Ansbach, wondering aloud, asked indirectly if it might be best to smooth things over with a story about him dying of illness.

Duke von Braunschweig rose from his chair. Displeasure was plain to see in his face and in his movements. His nerves had always had little elasticity, and now it looked like they were ready to snap at any moment.

“Even if we did ‘smooth things over,’ that doesn’t mean we could get away with hiding this. Ofresser was executed for the crime of betraying his comrades. Transmit that to all forces.”

Their leader departed, his every step a kick against the floor, and when he was gone, Ansbach shrugged one shoulder and ordered the soldiers to carry away the body of that giant who in life had been praised for his daring and feared for his brutality. The vacant eyes of the dead man seemed to glare at Ansbach. In a tired-sounding voice, he murmured, “Don’t give me that resentful look ... I don’t know what’ll happen tomorrow, either. It may well be you will give thanks in Valhalla that you could die before today was over.”

The commodore shuddered. He himself had heard an oddly prophetic ring in those words.

The aftereffects of this incident were great. Ofresser was supposed to have been at the head of the pack in despising Reinhard. If even he had turned traitor, who was there among them who could be as faithful and unwavering to the very end? As the nobles exchanged untrusting stares with one another, some of them even began losing faith in themselves ...



At the news of Ofresser’s horrific death, Reinhard’s mood brightened ever so slightly. It was a just reward for a man who had insulted not only himself but also his sister.

Reinhard named Vice Admiral Dickel commander of Rentenberg Fortress, made it a base for his own forces, and once again set about planning the operations to

advance on and attack Gaiesburg.

Just one aftereffect lingered among Reinhard's forces. Admirals von Reuentahl and Mittermeier remembered that mountain of corpses in Corridor Six every time they saw fricassee and, for some time after, grew nauseated when it was served.

CHAPTER 5

THE BATTLE OF THE DORIA STELLAR REGION

At first, Yang had intended to ignore the upheaval in the Shanpool Stellar Region, make straight for Heinessen, and use blitz attacks to pound the main force of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic into the sand. After all, cut the roots, and the branches and leaves will wither.

What had caused Yang to change his mind and decide to hit the enemies in the Shanpool Stellar Region first was his realization that through use of guerrilla tactics they could disrupt communications and supply lines between the Yang Fleet and Iserlohn. If he were the Military Congress's commander for the Shanpool Stellar Region, he would flee when the suppression force came at him and pursue it when it departed so as to strike at its rear and its supply lines. By repeating this pattern as many times as possible, the enemy regiment would be worn down. He wasn't about to stand for somebody doing that to him.

"But the enemy's commander isn't Yang Wen-li," said Julian, and asked him if he wasn't just worrying over nothing.

To which the dark-haired commander grinned and replied, "He might turn out to be the *next* Yang Wen-li."

After all, everybody started out as a nobody. Who had ever heard of Yang Wen-li before El Facil? Yang said as much to Julian and added: "If this was peacetime, I'd still be a nobody. A historian still gestating in his eggshell—I wouldn't have even hatched into a chick yet."

Yang was speaking of the life that he longed for. In the present day, those who didn't know his name were on the way to being the minority, yet still Yang couldn't abandon the wistful desire to be a mere scholar. Praises were being sung about him as a great and undefeated admiral, but to Yang more than anyone, that was just a virtual image projected on a wall by lens and mirror.

It was his interest in historical figures and events that made Yang want to be a historian. The ridiculous thing to him was that now he himself was becoming an object of interest and research. The Galactic Empire, Phezzan, and his present enemy, the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic were all studying Yang's tactics. Not only that, there were even a number of planets (starting with Heinessen), where books and videos about him were being published, full of irresponsible content and bearing frivolous titles like *Studies in Leadership Through*

the Eyes of Yang Wen-li; Strategic Thought, Tactical Thought: Yang Wen-li's Four Battles; and Profiles of Modern Genius III: Yang Wen-li.

The shining modern hero.

"That Yang Wen-li fellow sure is a great guy. You're lagging awfully far behind for somebody with the exact same name." Yang would remark sarcastically like this to his not-even-remotely-great-looking self in the mirror.

"But you really are a great man," Julian said fervently.

"How do you figure that?"

"Normally, you would surely have lost control of yourself a long time ago, become overconfident, and lost the ability to make objective decisions."

Yang had had his head cocked to one side when he'd asked that last question, but now, unexpectedly, he frowned.

"Don't tell me that to my face. Feels like I'm gonna slip up and believe you. I'll be like, 'Oh really? I'm a great man?'"

After that, he put on his serious face and preached Julian a sermon: You shouldn't praise those above you to their faces very often. If they're too soft, you'll make them conceited and ruin them in the end; and if they're too hard, they might end up avoiding you 'cause they think you're trying to curry favor. You have to be cautious ...

"Yes, sir," said Julian. "I understand." Yet inwardly, he thought there was something strange about that fretful and uncharacteristically hackneyed lesson.

Yang had just turned thirty and wasn't even married yet, but here he was lecturing Julian as if he were his father.



On the very day that Shanpool fell, Commander Bagdash of the Department of Military Intelligence, having made his escape from Heinessen, arrived by shuttle to meet with Yang. Yang began the attack to retake Shanpool on April 26 and, after three days of combat, liberated it from the rebel forces.

It was not an especially interesting battle. Unless a planet had a large population and heavy armaments like Heinessen, the landing—or rather, drop—operations had a fixed pattern that didn't leave a lot of room for commanders to show off their individual styles. First, space supremacy was established in satellite orbit. Then, after destroying the enemy's antiair radar and air-defense weaponry using spaceborne attacks, the ground troops were shuttled down to the surface under the protection of escort ships and fighter craft capable of atmospheric maneuvers. Finally, coordinating closely with one another, the space- and land-based forces took control of the targeted points.

Still, it was likely thanks to the outstanding tactical skill of von Schönpopf, commander of the ground battalions, that they were able to conclude the operation in just three days. An ordinary commander might have taken a week or more. Von Schönpopf's plan had been to secure strategic points using concentrated firepower, then connect them to one another with laterally deployed armored vehicles, forming lines. Then, by advancing those lines, the

area under his control would be expanded.

Later, after that tactic had been in use for a full day, the enemy began to adapt and figure out a way to respond. That was when von Schönpkopf suddenly switched to a different attack pattern, making a blitzkrieg straight-line advance on the enemy's stronghold from one of the points already secured.

The rebel units were unable to adapt to this sudden change from the lateral to the frontal. Although the leadership barricaded themselves inside buildings of the Alliance Armed Forces' district command center where they had made their home base, the outcome of the battle was already decided, since they had already been cut off from more than half of their military forces. After two hours of shooting and hand-to-hand combat, Captain Marron, commander of the rebel unit, put his blaster in his mouth and pulled the trigger, and those who remained raised a white flag.

"Outstanding work," Yang said, complimenting von Schönpkopf upon his return to the flagship *Hyperion*. He was shocked to see countless lipstick marks all over the face, hands, and uniform of his ground forces commander. He could just picture the wild enthusiasm of the locals after being liberated from more than half a month of living in fear.

"Well, I've got to enjoy the perks," von Schönpkopf said with a grin—and that was the state of affairs when Commander Bagdash made his appearance.

Once his identity was confirmed, Bagdash was escorted to the bridge right away. Everyone was starving for information from the capital, but the right to ask the first question resided with Yang, who would later occupy the head of the table in the meeting room.

The question Yang asked as everyone was looking on intently was "Who have they executed?"

Bagdash replied, "People have been arrested, but at least as of now, there have been no purges. I don't know what they'll do in the future, though."

"I see ..."

"More importantly, Admiral, I've come with some intel. The Eleventh Fleet has thrown in with the coup faction and is headed this way as we speak."

At this, there was a collective gasp. Yang, saying nothing, motioned for Bagdash to continue.

"The commander, Vice Admiral Legrange, is apparently hoping for a head-on, straight-up, decisive battle. He won't be using any tricks."

With no particular note of sarcasm, Yang murmured, "Well, thank goodness there will be no tricks," and opened the floor to his subordinates to ask their questions.

While being peppered with inquiries from Fischer, Murai, and the rest, Bagdash kept glancing around the room as if he were searching for someone. Finally, he said to Yang in a casual tone:

"Your aide Lieutenant Greenhill seems to be absent ..."

"Her position being what it is," Yang said, "I left her back at Iserlohn."

"Aagh!"

Everyone reflexively turned their heads to find that von Schönpkopf had spilled coffee all over his chest.

"Oh well," he said. "There go my kiss marks ... Excuse me for a moment."

Maintaining eye contact with Yang as he spoke, von Schönpkopf exited the

meeting room.

Julian was standing out in the hallway. Although he lacked the credentials to go inside, he could usually be found somewhere within earshot of Yang.

"You wouldn't know where Lieutenant Greenhill is, would you?" asked von Schönkopf.

"She went to the infirmary," Julian replied. "She said something about having a headache since this morning ... It's a shame she couldn't be here."

Psychological exhaustion, most likely. With a nod, von Schönkopf headed off toward the infirmary.

When he tried to enter the infirmary, a petite nurse took one look at his dirty field uniform, vividly colored with lipstick and coffee stains, and came forward, skewering him with a look of outrage.

"I believe Lieutenant Greenhill's here."

"She is, but you're not coming in here in that filthy outfit."

The nurse, who didn't even come up to von Schönkopf's shoulders, stood barring his way with a decisive bearing, but then another voice called out and rescued the commodore from his embarrassment.

"I don't mind. Please, Commodore von Schönkopf, come in."

The nurse silently let him through, although she didn't look happy about it.

Still wearing her uniform, Frederica was lying on a couch, but she stood up right away. Von Schönkopf, wishing silently that he could see her in a dress sometime, briefly explained the situation.

"... And as for Admiral Yang, he smells something fishy, too. The arrival of escapees these days is just a little too perfectly timed. When the admiral practically said as much, I deliberately spilled coffee on myself and shouted, so Bagdash shouldn't have seen everyone's surprised expressions. But I wonder if you might have some idea who he is."

"I met Commander Bagdash one time. Five years ago, in my father's study. He was expressing dissatisfaction with the current political order."

Frederica's reputation for extraordinary powers of memory was widely known.

"I see. He must have been worried that you would remember something, Lieutenant Greenhill. Seeing as he's an operative for the coup faction."

Apparently, even Admiral Greenhill—the leader of the coup faction—didn't have all that many people he could count on for a mission like this. The plan was probably to murder Admiral Yang early if Frederica's memories put Bagdash under suspicion. If such a thing were to happen in the midst of combat with the Eleventh Fleet, the Yang Fleet would be wiped out, and the coup d'état would succeed. Even if Bagdash lost his life, the life of an assassin was a small investment.

Von Schönkopf cared not a whit whether the Free Planets Alliance was saved or destroyed, but if Yang were to perish, the unfolding of history from that point forward would certainly lose some of its charm. Easily and without reservation, von Schönkopf made a decision.

It was just before dinner when Yang asked von Schönkopf, "Is Commander Bagdash coming?"

"He's sleeping now."

"Did you do something to him?" Yang's tone suggested that he foresaw the answer.

Von Schönkopf winked and said, "I used a special sleeping agent. He shouldn't open his eyes for the next two weeks. With military intelligence types, even if you lock them up, you can never let your guard down as long as they're awake. It's best we have him sleep until this next battle is over."

"Thanks for your hard work." Yang's words of gratitude came mingled with a wry smile.

II

Under these tense circumstances, the calendar turned to May. The Eleventh Fleet was steadily closing a distance of more than three thousand light-years of interstellar space. On this point, the veracity of Bagdash's intelligence had been confirmed.

Yang brought his fleet forward as far as the Doria system, where it spent its days collecting and analyzing intelligence. On May 10, a destroyer that had gone out to reconnoiter as far as the approaching Elgon system discovered the presence of a large fleet of warships. After sending out an emergency transmission, its communications broke off. Although it was still the eve of the battle, the first sacrifice had been made. Yang's mind was racing from one thing to another. He felt confident that they could win even in a head-on clash, but he was waiting on a certain report to come in from reconnaissance ships he had concealed at strategic points throughout this vast region of space. If the Yang Fleet didn't win this fight quickly and thoroughly, it would only become harder to lop off all the tentacles of this conspiracy.

On May 18, Julian brought the twentieth report of the day to Yang, who was walking around in circles in his private rooms. The other nineteen that had arrived so far lay wadded up on the floor. Listlessly, Yang lowered his gaze to the text of the report.

"I knew it!" he said suddenly. "*This is it!*"

The young, dark-haired commander leapt up and shouted, tossed the report up toward the ceiling, grabbed both hands of a dumbfounded Julian, and started dancing around the room with him. As Julian was being slung this way and that, he had a sudden realization and cried out in a loud voice, "Excellency! We can win this, can't we? We can win this!"

"You bet we can win it! 'Yang Wen-li doesn't fight hopeless battles!' Isn't that right?"

That was when he heard the sound of someone clearing his throat. Yang stopped dancing and looked toward where the sound had come from. Three people—von Schönkopf, Frederica Greenhill, and Fischer—were staring at their commander.

Yang let go of Julian's hands and reached up to straighten his disheveled hair—at some point, his beret had gone flying off as well.

"Good news," he said. "The plan is decided. It's looking like we're gonna be able to win this somehow."

After receiving the data he had been waiting for, Yang had planned the operation in a shockingly brief amount of time. The operations plan that he shared with his entire force thirty minutes later was as follows, with the first point being the content of the report that he had been waiting for:

1. The enemy has divided its forces into two units. We believe they intend a pincer movement, in which one unit, taking advantage of being eclipsed by the star Doria, will try to attack us on our port flank, while the other will take a detour to our rear and try to hit our aft starboard.
2. To counter this, our forces, acting six hours ahead of the enemy, will take advantage of their divided state to destroy the units individually. First we will strike the unit circling around to our aft, then we will deal with the attack on our port flank.
3. The operation will commence today at 2200 with Admiral Nguyen Van Thieu leading the charge. We will cross the orbit of the seventh planet and take position in that region of space, with the star Doria at our backs.
4. Rear Admiral Fischer will command our rear guard unit, which will maintain position until 0400 on the following day. Afterward, he will cross the orbit of the sixth planet and deploy his forces there to respond to enemies planning to attack our port flank. However, care must be taken to avoid detection by enemy reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering vessels, so this unit must not change its position or alert status until 0400 of the following day.
5. The other combat groups will follow Admiral Nguyen Van Thieu and position themselves to the port, starboard, and aft of the designated coordinates.
6. Admiral Attenborough will command the gunship and missile ship regiments, position them in orbit around the seventh planet, and, in addition to securing the communications route between our forces and Iserlohn Fortress, provide early warning of long-range attacks originating from other star systems. Furthermore, they will prevent fleeing enemy forces from escaping to other star systems.
7. Commander Yang will personally lead the central combat group.

When these orders from Commander Yang were transmitted, a thrill of tension and excitement shot through the entire fleet.

“Recently when I traveled to Heinessen,” Yang told his staff in the meeting room later, “I received written orders from His Excellency Admiral Bucock, commander in chief of the space armada, telling me that in the event of a revolt, I was to put it down and restore law and order. In other words, I’ve received legal justification for what we’re about to do. This is no private war.”

Hearing Yang’s words in the meeting room, his staff officers were left speechless at the scope of their commander’s foresight. Of course, Yang himself

was in a bit of a sour mood. After all, even if his predictions had been correct, they hadn't been able to prevent this present state of affairs. That was what Yang and Bucock had been hoping for that night on those park benches in the city back on Heinessen.

After dismissing the staff, Yang retired to his private rooms and called Julian.

"Shortly before the Battle of Amritsar," Yang told him, "Admiral Bucock tried to get a meeting with Marshal Lobos. He wasn't able to, however, because the marshal was taking his nap. What do you think about that?"

"I think it's horrible," Julian said. "It's irresponsible, and ..."

"Exactly. But, Julian?"

"Sir?"

"I am about to take a nap. For just two hours, don't put anybody through to me. I don't care if they're admirals or generals—just send them away."



On the bridge of *Leonidas*, the Eleventh Fleet's flagship ...

"Has there been any word from Commander Bagdash?" asked Vice Admiral Legrange, glaring at the staff officer who was his intelligence chief.

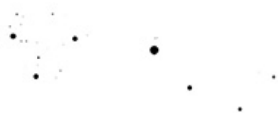
As Legrange's brow furrowed at the answer of "None, sir," a communications officer looked up at the fleet's commander.

"We're ready for fleetwide broadcast, sir. Please begin."

The vice admiral nodded. Driving thoughts of Bagdash from his mind, he unfolded the draft of his speech.

"Attention, all hands. This is a battle on which hangs two things: the success or failure of this military revolution to rescue our republic, and the prosperity or ruin of our fatherland. Perform your duties with your entire body and soul, and fulfill your devotion to the fatherland. Nothing in this world demands greater respect than devotion and sacrifice, and nothing is more despicable than cowardice and self-centeredness. Patriotism and courage is what I expect of you all and what I long earnestly for you to show me. Give this your all."

The Eleventh Fleet charged across the void, certain of its coming triumph.



With a light yawn, Yang Wen-li raised the back of his chair. Julian handed him a hot towel and a cup of cold water.

"How long was I asleep?"

"An hour and a half."

"I wanted to sleep another thirty minutes. Oh well, can't go back to sleep now ... Thanks, you did great."

After handing his drained cup back to the boy, he gently straightened the scarf

at his collar. Soon, he was going to have to make another little speech. That wasn't something that Yang enjoyed doing, but speechmaking, too, was one of the commanding officer's duties. He stood up and went to the bridge. Every face in that spacious room turned toward their commander, wearing tense expressions.

"The battle is just about to begin," Yang said. "It's a meaningless battle, and for that reason, it would be all the more pointless to fight it and not win. We do have a plan for victory, though, so just relax and do your jobs, and don't go pushing yourselves too hard. What's riding on this is at most the life or death of the state. Compared to individual rights and liberty, the state is just not worth all that much. Well then, everyone, shall we begin?"

By the time he had finished speaking into the microphone, a sparkling cloud of lights was beginning to appear on the main screen. They shone with an ominous white.

Displayed there was a side view of the Eleventh Fleet's main force—a column of seven thousand warships. Beyond, the stars spread out in infinite succession.

"Enemy fleet sighted! All ships, prepare for combat!"

III

Yang was not the fierce commander type of leader, but he could always be found on the front line when going into battle and in the rear when disengaging—particularly in losing battles, in which he would stay behind to cover his comrades' retreat.

That, he believed, was his bare-minimum duty as a commander. If it wasn't, then who in their right mind would entrust their life to a greenhorn who had only just turned thirty?

In front of Yang's flagship, three thousand vessels under the command of Admiral Nguyen Van Thieu were waiting with bated breath for the order to attack. As were his comrades arrayed port, aft, and starboard.

"Relative distance 6.4 light-seconds ..."

The operators' voices, too, were as low as whispers.

"Enemy is moving from starboard to port perpendicular to our fleet. Velocity 0.012 c. Near maximum velocity for in-system flight ..."

In the restrained illumination of the dim bridge, the only other sound besides operators' voices was that of shallow breathing.

His gaze fixed on the screen, Yang raised his right hand as high as the line of his shoulder. That was the signal that started everything.

"Fire!"

The order was relayed to the gunners on every vessel.

In the next instant, white-hot javelins of energy, tens of thousands of them, pierced the darkness of outer space. These had not been fired in parallel from each ship but were focused on a single point in the midst of the enemy fleet.

A striking characteristic of Yang's beam-cannon tactics was his concentration of fire on a single point, so as to increase geometrically the beams' destructive power. This was one of the reasons he had so grieved the empire during the Battle of Amritsar last year. When multiple allied ships showered a single enemy vessel with their firepower, the enemy's energy-neutralization fields were easily

overloaded.

“Energy waves approaching rapidly!”

The operators of the Eleventh Fleet cried out warnings that were halfway screams. In that instant, a huge mass of energy struck the first blow, smashing into the fleet’s flank.

There was heat and light like that of a small star. In its midst, several hundred ships were vaporized, and three or four times that number exploded.

The white light of the fusion explosions pulsated, expanding every instant, until it seemed as if that eerie light would bleach out the entire screen.

Julian was sitting next to Yang’s command desk. For the first time in his life, the boy was witnessing combat in outer space directly. Aware of the shiver running down his spine, he tried to tell himself that it wasn’t fear but excitement. *Not yet, not yet. It’s only just begun.*

“Send a message to Admiral Nguyen Van Thieu,” Yang said. He was not in his seat but was sitting on top of his command desk with one knee raised. This was outrageously ill-mannered, and yet his subordinates felt oddly reassured seeing him like that. “Tell him to advance at full speed and hit the enemy on the flank.”

On receiving the order, Nguyen felt his spirit lift.

Nguyen Van Thieu was the fierce commander type, so when he was supported by the coolheaded leadership of central command, the destructive power he could wield was enormous. Out of Reinhard’s subordinates, he was most similar to Wittenfeld.

“Charge!”

Nguyen Van Thieu’s order was clarity itself, and there was no way for his officers to mistake it.

“Charge! Charge!”

With its commanding officer front and center, Nguyen Van Thieu’s combat group attacked the enemy fleet’s flank at maximum combat velocity. The energy beams and shells released from the mouths of their cannons rained against the enemy, and flashes of light from launches and explosions lit up one small corner of the eternal night.

From the vast hole opened up by the volley of cannon fire, Nguyen’s group succeeded in cutting deep into the enemy’s column.

Staff officers in the Eleventh Fleet turned pale. If they allowed Nguyen to advance any farther, the entire fleet would become divided fore and aft. And although it was theoretically possible to use a divided force like that to catch one’s opponent in a pincer movement, very flexible and refined tactical skill was required to make that work—skill such as that possessed by Yang Wen-li.

Since they didn’t have that much confidence in themselves, they made a more commonsense response. Orders flew: *Attack the enemy from all directions! Don’t send a man or a ship back home alive!*

Right away, Nguyen’s group was exposed to ferocious attacks converging on them from five directions—fore, up, down, port, and starboard. Fireballs exploded, vibrations shook the frames of the vessels, and viewscreens—in spite of spite having had their photoflux capacities adjusted—were filled with flashes bright enough to sear the retinas.

On the bridge of the flagship *Maurya*, Admiral Nguyen raised his voice in cheerful laughter.

"This is perfect—nothing but enemies any which way you turn! So many there's no need to aim! Get them! Keep shooting! Fire at will!"

Some there were impressed by what they saw as their commander's daring and boldness; others present were certain he must have a screw loose. Either way, one thing was certain—they would have no tomorrow unless they killed the enemies before them. There was no time to consider the meaning of this battle or the reasons for this slaughter.

"Missiles closing at ten o'clock! Returning fire!"

"Turret four, maximum output!"

Shrill voices and suppressed voices permeated the communication channels, and the sounds of impacts and jamming noise blended to repeatedly assault the ears of the crew—even though it was a universe of silence just outside the vessels.

Their vision was similarly under attack. The light of the stars, frozen for all eternity, was rent by crisscrossing missile trails and the harsh glitter of energy beams. And the white lights that wiped away each and every one of those stars monopolized the field of view with their overwhelming volume.

Thirty minutes after the opening shots were fired, even Yang's flagship *Hyperion* had its nose pressed up against the Eleventh Fleet's flank.

Hyperion was enveloped in rainbow fog, proof that its hull was being protected from destructive energy beams by its energy-neutralization field.

"This is more trouble than I expected," Yang murmured to himself as he kept his eyes glued to the screen. The Eleventh Fleet's resistance was quite formidable, and it was known to all that Vice Admiral Legrange was no incompetent.

"That useless Bagdash!" shouted Legrange. "What did he even infiltrate the Yang Fleet for?"

While continuing to oversee the battle, Legrange couldn't help berating the man in his heart. *Use mis- and disinformation to throw the enemy into disarray, or if that is impossible, shoot Yang dead.* Bagdash was supposed to have infiltrated the enemy camp on this vital do-or-die mission, but at present, Legrange doubted that the man had succeeded. Far from it, actually, since his was the side that had been hit on the flank by what should probably be called an ambush. Instead of catching the enemy in a pincer movement, were his divided forces going to be destroyed separately?

Had they seen through Bagdash, after all? Legrange clenched his teeth tightly. Perhaps he had entrusted the job to someone he shouldn't have. Unease and regret were pounding on his chest with invisible hands.

The voice of an operator requesting instructions pulled his consciousness back to reality.

"What is it?"

"They've broken through the center, sir. Our force has been divided fore and aft, and it looks like the enemy's trying to envelop the aft section."

Although Nguyen's combat group, showered with fierce cannon fire, had taken considerable damage, it had at last succeeded in breaking through the center. Then it had swung to starboard and was now advancing to envelop one half of the divided enemy force.

Legrange fell silent and glared at the screen. He knew what Yang had in mind. *I see it now. So that was it!* A frustrated *tsk* sounded from inside his mouth.

"Miracle Yang is a pretty sly fox, confound him."

In short, Yang had split at the tactical level one half of a force that was already split at the strategic level and was now trying to completely destroy them, starting with one of the severed ends.

This made the firepower ratio between those two about four-to-one. Once the battle reached this stage, fleet commander Yang no longer needed to oscillate between hope and despair with the minute-by-minute state of the battle; he could simply look on as his lower-ranking commanders took out each segment one by one.

From Yang's perspective, this sort of thing wasn't any kind of remarkable strategy; it was nothing more than following one of the rudimentary principles of tactical theory: "Fight with greater force strength than your enemy." He was both surprised and disappointed when he heard it referred to as a magic trick or a miracle.

The main forces of both fleets made contact. The ship density in the region increased, and the mode of fighting gradually shifted from long-range cannon fire to close-quarters combat. This was where the single-seat fighter craft known as spartanians took the stage. Lieutenant Commander Olivier Poplin, captain of *Hyperion's* flight squadron, had lined up his team on standby, but the instant that the order came down to sortie, he had all of them board their craft, cut loose from the mother ship, and dance out into space.

"Whiskey, Vodka, Rum, Applejack: command of your companies is left to your company leaders. Sherry and Cognac, follow me. Don't break formation."

Poplin often boasted, "Wine and women are life's bread and butter, and war merely its three o'clock snack," and it was just like him to come up with such names. Of course, there was also a story going around that he had come close to naming his companies after women's undergarments, but naturally he had refrained in the end and settled for booze.

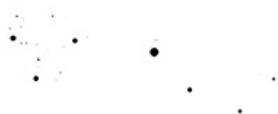
Poplin's spartanian charged ahead, tracing out an invisible path through the void. Sherry and Cognac companies followed behind the ace pilot, and the other four dispersed in different directions in search of enemies.

The ships of the Eleventh Fleet were launching single-seat fighters one after another as well. Dogfighting between spartanians began breaking out in all quarters amid the crisscrossing cannon fire. Because the specs of the fighter craft were identical, victory and defeat were decided by the skill of the pilots inside them. Many of the fighter pilots approached their work with the zeal of a craftsman, and for them a trial like this could be called the chance of a lifetime. At this moment, those involved were not thinking about the fact that they were killing one another; rather, they were simply drunk on the blood-boiling excitement of it all.

Not two minutes had elapsed since launch, and Poplin had already scored three kills. Dodging through enemy as well as allied fire, he raced ahead at maximum velocity through rough seas of roiling energies. The raw vitality of a fully self-realized existence was circulating at full speed through Poplin's entire being. With his reflexes honed to their utmost sharpness, every cell in his body was bursting with energy and life.

The battleship *Ulysses* was also in the midst of the chaotic fighting. The ship's outer hull had been cut open by a blade of energy, causing the shock-absorbent material to leak out in a white cloud as it enveloped the ship. Visibility from the

rear turrets had been degraded and sensors rendered useless, and after cursing God and devil alike, the soldiers inside had had to give up on doing anything other than shooting back in the direction of incoming fire.



Eight hours were required for the desperate combat to draw to an end.

After breaking through the center of the Eleventh Fleet and destroying its aft column, the Yang Fleet enveloped the forward column headed by Admiral Legrange and smashed its forces ship by ship. Because nearly all of the vessels, carrying on with a resistance that reached the fanatical, refused to surrender, there was no other option.

What for Yang, too, was a depressing battle of utter destruction was brought to an end by the suicide of Admiral Legrange. He had stubbornly continued to resist until his remaining forces had amounted to his own flagship and just a handful of others.

"I count it a great honor for a humble officer such as myself to have fought the illustrious Yang Wen-li in my final battle. Hail to the military revolution!"

These had been Lagrange's last words, broadcast to all by his flagship's communications officer.

Staff Officer Patrichev breathed out a huge sigh that emptied his lungs. "Well, then, that's that. That was one heck of a fight."

But no matter how intense the combat had been, the winner and loser this time had actually been determined quite early.

Numerically, Admiral Yang had had twice the force strength of his opponent and, furthermore, had succeeded in splitting it with a strike on its flank. That it had taken so long to achieve total victory from such an overwhelmingly advantageous position was proof that the Eleventh Fleet had fought the good fight under Legrange's fierce direction. Yang would have called it a meaningless good fight, though. *If only he would have thrown his hands up early ...*

"If Legrange had been incompetent, there would've been a few less deaths on both sides," said von Schökopf.

Yang nodded silently. From the moment that the first stage of combat was finished, he seemed to have been overwhelmed by exhaustion.

So, ultimately, does the Yang Fleet amount to just this one man? thought von Schökopf. Without their young commander's clever schemes, the Yang Fleet was certainly not a powerful force. From the start, it had been a ragtag mixture of defeated remnants and raw recruits. Dragged along by their commander's invincible reputation, they had kept on fighting and kept on winning, and thus achieved the military feats of today. But even if that were true, what von Schökopf had said about Legrange certainly applied to Yang as well. For if Yang had been an incompetent commander, this fleet would have been wiped out early while the scale of the combat was still small, and in exchange, many enemy soldiers would have lived to go back to their hometowns.

Even if they left the past in the past, there was still a problem looming in the

future, for there was another individual in this galaxy who also boasted an invincible reputation.

Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm. The day would surely come when he and Yang would do battle with all of their forces and all of their abilities. It was not so much the work of fate or destiny as the rapid convergence of history's footsteps that would bring that about. On that day, could the Yang Fleet defeat Reinhard's forces? Or, rather, could Yang's subordinates win out over Reinhard's?

That's a difficult question, von Schönpkopf mused. From just what he knew, Kircheis was another Reinhard in terms of ability, and Mittermeier's and von Reuentahl's operational command abilities were also extremely high. The likes of Nguyen Van Thieu probably couldn't compete with them.

And still, when he looked at the victorious Yang sitting there unhappily, he could hardly believe it was the same person he'd seen dancing for joy at receiving favorable intelligence. His qualities as an invincible artist of war and his qualities as a serious and conscientious student of history were always in competition inside of him, and when the battle was over, it was the mood of the latter that dominated him.

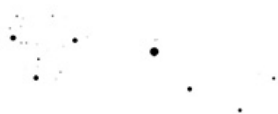
"Commander Yang!"

The voice that made the young black-haired commander turn around belonged to his aide, Lieutenant Frederica Greenhill.

"Half of the enemy is still left. The longer we wait here, the heavier a load Admiral Fischer will have to bear. Instructions, please!"

Her words were right on the mark. Yang blinked his eyes twice and stretched.

"All ships: fall in!" he said. "Reverse course, and head for the orbit of the seventh planet."



Meanwhile, a heated argument was being waged among the Eleventh Fleet's secondary force, which had launched a blitz attack on the sector where Yang was supposed to be, only to find nobody there. One side argued that they should reverse course and go fight with Yang, but the other side had the following idea:

Given the present circumstances, shouldn't they abandon the idea of a short, decisive battle, withdraw from the Doria system for the time being, and wait for Yang to besiege Heinessen so as to attack him then from behind? With Artemis's Necklace there, it was impossible for even someone like Yang to conquer Heinessen in a short time. If they attacked him then from behind, they might be able to win.

This serious disagreement dragged out between the two sides. The reason that no swift decision could be made was due to a flaw that was clear to see: the highest figure of authority had not yet been clearly determined.

At last it was decided to locate Yang and challenge him in battle, so they brought all their ships about and started moving. During this period, however, the brief time Yang had wasted had been balanced out by the time they spent arguing.

Rear Admiral Fischer, however, who at that moment was observing the movements of the secondary enemy force, had determined that the column of ships he saw fighting the solar wind was in disarray and thus issued the order to open fire.

Fischer's style of cannon warfare, following Yang's example, was also characterized by concentrated fire on localized areas. Caught in a completely unexpected downpour of energy beams on its flank, the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic suffered serious damage.

Fischer was an expert at fleet operations, and no matter how long the road to the distant battlefield, there was no fear of vessels losing track of their own positions, or of the fleet losing its shape due to ships dropping out of ranks, as long as he was present. On the other hand, he was rather average as a combat commander. Still, he had a precise grasp of his own abilities and had never gotten overconfident.

While keeping allied casualties to a bare minimum, he planned to buy time until Yang, who had destroyed the Eleventh Fleet's main force, could rush over to assist. That strategy was rewarded with success. The Eleventh Fleet's secondary force, unable to ignore the damage it was taking, assayed to do battle with Fischer's fleet. When they did so, Fischer pulled back. When the secondary force tried to depart, Fischer followed hot on its heels to launch an attack from behind. While he was repeating this pattern, Yang's main force appeared in search of a new battlefield, and a formation emerged that had the enemy caught in a pincer movement between its fore and aft.

Without even Legrange to guide them, the secondary force had no unified command structure and, after brave but fruitless combat, was annihilated. Yang had avoided close combat and had split the enemy column and destroyed the pieces one-by-one using thoroughly concentrated firepower. Taking almost no damage to his own forces, he thus secured the victory.

IV

"Eleventh Fleet defeated. Admiral Legrange dead of suicide."

"Yang Fleet poised to advance on and attack Heinessen following resupply and repairs."

"Security forces and volunteer soldiers from all planets steadily coalescing behind Yang."

As these reports came in, an oppressive air came over the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic on Heinessen.

"This is what they mean by 'fears within and fears without,'" muttered someone. They had declared martial law in the capital and, through the use of military force, were trying to regulate and administer every aspect of society, including its political, economic, and social spheres. There was no way to prevent confusion, however. Everyday crime and accidents had been reduced by the curfew order, but more importantly, prices had begun to rise, and shortages of consumables had become noticeable. Fearing that the displeasure and anxiety of the citizenry would mount, the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic had embarked on an investigation, asking, among other things, the opinions of a merchant who had come from Phezzan.

“You soldiers just don’t understand economics,” the merchant said sharply. “Heinessen is currently isolated from other stellar regions. Closed off, it’s a self-contained economic unit, but it’s a deformed one, with vastly more consumption going on than production. That being the case, as long as you have a market-based economic system, it’s only natural that prices will rise. First, you should stop regulating the distribution network and ease up on the control of news reporting in order to reassure the people. If you don’t, you’re not going to have a healthy economy or society.”

The one who was listening to these remarks was one Captain Evens, who was entrusted with control of the economy, and to him, this sound argument was altogether worthless. For the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic to rule Heinessen with its small numbers, control over transmissions, transportation, and distribution was essential, and improving the health of the economy was completely irrelevant. When soldiers designed economic policy, the result often ended up being national socialism implemented through rigid control and supervision. The merchant from Phezzan could see that this captain was no exception.

“Economies are living things,” he said. “Try to control them, and they will never go in the direction you expect. In the military, an officer can go so far as to strike subordinates to make them follow orders, but there’s going to be trouble if the economy is treated that way. If, instead, you were to leave things to us Phezzanese ...”

“Know your place!” the captain shouted. “We are going to overthrow the tyrants of the Galactic Empire and restore freedom and justice to the whole society of mankind. And when that day dawns, we’ll teach the meaning of justice to you Phezzan mammonites, as well. Don’t delude yourself into thinking that money can uphold society and the hearts of the people.”

“That’s a great line,” said the merchant, ripples of cool ridicule brimming in his eyes. “However, it might be better with one little change. Put ‘violence’ where ‘money’ is. I imagine you can think of so many examples.”

Infuriated, Captain Evens put a hand on his blaster, but naturally he didn’t follow through, instead going only so far as to order his soldiers to throw the merchant out of his office. The fact that prices were high and consumable resources scarce, however, could not be gotten rid of so easily. In the end, what he did was arrest several fraudulent merchants and release resources he had requisitioned, which made no contribution whatsoever toward solving the fundamental problem.

A strange and even troubling rumor was beginning to circulate: the claim that there was an informant inside the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic who was leaking information to the Trünicht government.

First of all, how exactly had Job Trünicht managed to escape? In the aftermath of the coup, that question had been on everyone’s minds. Both the acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters and the commander in chief of the space armada had been arrested, so why had it been possible for the chairman to evade the attack?

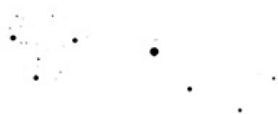
Did that mean Trünicht had received intelligence about the coup? All anyone could come up with was that he must have had an informant on the inside who had told him the date and the time that the coup would take place. If not, he

could never have disappeared from his office as if it had been planned. Even Admiral Bucock, commander in chief of the space armada, seemed to have somehow gotten vague intel on the matter, not that there had been anything he could have done with it. From that perspective as well, Trünicht must have surely known quite a lot.

Admiral Greenhill ordered a man called Captain Bay to stamp out such discussions, as he believed nothing good would come of it if his small number of compatriots started eyeing one another with suspicion. The voices of the rumormongers, however, were only lowered, and without disappearing altogether, an insidious atmosphere began to circulate among the members of the Military Congress.

A number of days passed amid anxiety and unease, without the situation improving in the slightest.

And then the catastrophe struck. It was what later generations would call the Stadium Massacre.



Heinessen Memorial Stadium, like the planet on which it stood, took its name from the founding father of the alliance. This was partly because national ceremonies were held there on occasion, but another reason for that name had been the idea of elevating national consciousness. That made this name, lacking in originality, an inevitability.

The day that it happened was June 22.

Citizens were gathering inside that huge stadium, which had the capacity to hold three hundred thousand spectators. The stream of people started in the morning, and by noon the number had reached two hundred thousand.

The declaration of martial law forbade large gatherings of people. The Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic was astonished at this open act of defiance, and its members turned white with rage when they learned the purpose of this assembly. The slogan that read “Citizens’ Assembly to Restore Peace and Freedom, and Oppose Rule by Violence” was shockingly bold and provocative.

Who’s behind this ... ?

They looked into the matter, and then growls arose from the table at the result.

That woman!

Jessica Edwards. The assemblywoman elected to represent the Terneuzen District, she had been at the forefront of the antiwar movement. She was the woman who had once publicly impeached then Defense Committee Chairman Trünicht and had never stopped criticizing the stupidity of the war and the military. In spite of the declaration of martial law, she had escaped arrest thus far because right now it was all the coup could manage to capture the very highest leaders in the government and military; they simply didn’t have the manpower to be going after leaders of minority parties in the assembly.

“Disperse the crowd and arrest Assemblywoman Edwards.” The man who received that order and rushed over to the stadium leading three thousand

armed troops was Captain Christian, and this was a personnel decision that the leaders of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic would come to rue afterward.

From the very beginning, Captain Christian had no intention of gently enlightening the multitude.

Leading his armored troops, he went into the stadium, placed guards at the entrance, and, after intimidating the crowd with his sidearm, ordered his subordinates to find Jessica and bring her before him.

Jessica appeared before the captain voluntarily and, in an uncompromising tone, asked him why armed soldiers were interfering with a peaceful assembly of citizens.

“To restore order.”

“Order? Wasn’t it originally you—you people from the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic—who disrupted public order with your violence? When you talk about order, what in the world is that supposed to mean?”

“Order is what we decide it is,” Captain Christian shot back haughtily. Sheltering in his eyes was the madness of one who believed there were no limits to his power and authority. “Living under a mobocracy has made the alliance’s society lose all restraint, and it must be returned to normalcy.” Turning to his soldiers, he continued: “Now I’m going to find out whether people who spout irresponsible pacifism are willing to do so at the risk of their lives. Bring me exactly ten protesters and line them up here. Any among them will do.”

The soldiers who received that order dragged about ten of the male participants to him. Dissenting voices rose up from among the citizens trapped inside the stadium, but the captain ignored them. After making a show of drawing his blaster, he came to stand in front of those men, who had, understandably, gone pale.

“Citizens of lofty ideals ...” Mocking them, he looked around at the crowd. “You think peaceful speech is better than violence. That’s what you all want to say, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.” One of the young men who had been brought forward had answered him in a trembling voice. In that instant, the captain’s wrist flashed, and his blaster’s gunstock broke the young man’s cheekbone.

“And the next man ...”

Without sparing a glance for the man who had silently fallen to the ground, the captain next asked a skinny middle-aged man, “Do you still say the same thing too?”

The captain pressed his blaster up against the man’s temple. The man seemed terrified by the blood on its stock. His whole body started to tremble, beads of cold sweat broke out on his pale face, and he begged, “I’m sorry. Please, I’ve got a wife and kid. Please don’t kill me ...”

Laughing loudly, Captain Christian raised the blaster up over his head and brought the stock down hard on the man’s face. His upper lip burst, and blood went flying with scattered pieces of front teeth. The man screamed and was about to fall, but the captain grabbed him by the collar and delivered yet another blow. The sound of his nose breaking was audible.

“Listen to you, talking big like that when you’re not even ready to die for it ... Come on, try saying this: ‘Peace is only preserved through military force. Peace

can't exist separate from the fleet.' Say it. *Say it!*"

"*Stop that!*"

Jessica caught the man as he collapsed and, holding up his head, gently laid him down on the ground. Then she rose to her feet. The captain saw flames of anger burning in her eyes.

"You think that if you're ready to die for it, you can do just any stupid thing? Any terrible thing?"

"Shut up, you—"

"There's a breed of people who force their own righteousness on others through violence. They come in all sizes, from big ones like the Galactic Empire's founder, Rudolph von Goldenbaum, to little ones like you, Captain ... You are Rudolph's own son. Understand that. And then get out of this place where you have no right to be!"

"You whore!"

In the instant he gasped out that word, the thread of his reason snapped without a sound. A blaster already smeared with the blood of two others was slammed into Jessica's face. Three times, then four, the captain struck her with all his might, the glint of sanity having vanished from his eyes. Skin split apart. Blood flew through the air, making colorful dots all over the captain's uniform.

Civilians and soldiers alike were staring dazedly at the captain's frenzy, but when at last Jessica was lying on the ground covered in fresh blood and the captain still stomped on her face with his uniform boot, a chorus of shouts rose up like an explosion, and one of the civilians slammed his own body into the captain. The captain staggered, and then, cheeks twisted with fury, he brought his weapon down on the man's back. There was a dull *thud*, but it was erased completely by countless cries of rage and footfalls of a crowd that was beginning to stampede. Things quickly escalated into a full-blown clash. The captain disappeared beneath the feet of the multitude.

Soldiers used beam rifles to mow down civilians, but when the rifles ran out of energy or were forcibly taken by civilians, there was not a thing they could do before the raging sea of people. They were beaten to the ground and trampled underfoot.

The Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic was uniformly shocked when its members learned of the riot at the stadium. They attempted to calm the people, but when it became clear that several dozen rifles had been stolen by civilians, they decided there was no room for dialogue and pivoted to suppression by force.

Large numbers of infirmity gas shells were fired into the stadium. The gas itself had no power to kill, although not a few deaths resulted from direct hits by the shells. Those who collapsed after breathing the gas were arrested on charges of violating martial law and thrown into prison, yet even so, quite a few of those involved succeeded in getting away. Lack of personnel prevented the military from pursuing and arresting them, and the security police were not merely uncooperative but displayed a tendency toward active sabotage. And even if broadcasts were tightly controlled, muffling the voice of every person was simply impossible. Dealing with the aftermath of this incident was extremely difficult. In terms of deaths alone, the numbers rose to more than 20,000 civilians and 1,500 soldiers.

“What do we do if the whole city—the whole planet—rises up together? There’s no way we could handle that. And we can’t just massacre them all, either ...”

The members of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic had realized too late that they were a minority that had never had the support of the people.

V

Bagdash, who had been sedated with a sleeping agent, at long last opened his eyes. When informed of the situation, he sat there dazed for a while and then—inexplicably—requested a meeting with Yang.

This took place just as Yang was reluctantly finishing his after-dinner vegetable juice. Unlike dark tea, he couldn’t drip brandy into vegetable juice. Bagdash, who appeared at that moment accompanied by von Schönkopf, admitted plainly that the ultimate goal of his mission had been to assassinate Yang. He further went on to say, “And the reason I participated in the coup was because I thought it had a chance of succeeding. I can’t stand here and say that it was just some terrible misunderstanding. Your clever strategies exceeded all of our predictions, so there’s nothing to be done about you now.”

Saying nothing, Yang stared at the bottom of his paper cup.

“Honestly, if you hadn’t been there, everything would’ve worked perfectly. You really butted in.”

Watching him pour out his heartfelt disappointment and frustration, Yang couldn’t help but let a wry smile slip onto his face.

“So, you requested this meeting so you could register complaints about me ... to me?”

“It isn’t that.”

“Well then, what is it?”

“I want to turn. I want to work under you.”

Yang turned the empty paper cup around and around meaninglessly in his hand. “I wonder if you’re really able to toss out ideology and conviction and turn that easily,” he said.

“Ideology? Conviction?” Bagdash said with shameless scorn. “Those are just expedients for getting through life. If they get in the way of my staying alive, then out the door they go.”

It was in this manner that Bagdash came to be treated as one who had voluntarily laid down his arms and surrendered, and was confined to quarters in a cabin on board *Hyperion*. He had an insolent attitude, however, and complained that there was no wine with his meals. He also demanded that the soldiers who brought him his meals be women—and extraordinarily beautiful ones, to boot. The officer in charge of guarding him got angry and complained to Yang about his attitude, but the young, dark-haired commander did not say the word “Inexcusable!”

“Well, why not?” he said. “I’m not so sure about the women soldiers thing, but I don’t mind if you at least give him wine.”

Graciousness toward shameless and impudent men somehow seemed an odd point of commonality between Reinhard and Yang.

Two or three days passed by, and Bagdash appeared before Yang once again. Yang was in his private room, up to his neck in desk work as he dealt with the battle's aftermath, planned the next operation, reorganized units, and so on.

"To be honest," said Bagdash, "I'm tired of puttering around with nothing to do. I've started wanting to work. Do you think you could give me some kind of duties?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll put you to good use soon enough."

Yang pulled a gun from his desk drawer.

"My gun. I'll let you borrow it. It does me no good even if I carry it."

Yang's reputation as a shoddy marksman was well established.

"I, uh, appreciate it ..." Bagdash murmured as he took the gun, checked to see that an energy capsule was loaded, and stared at Yang, whose eyes were turned down on his paperwork. Silently, he turned the barrel toward him.

"Admiral Yang!"

Yang looked up at the sound of his voice, but although he saw the barrel pointed at himself, his expression didn't really change, and he just turned his eyes back down to the paperwork once again.

"Don't tell anybody I let you borrow that gun, Officer. Murai and the others like to nag. If you'll just understand that up front, we'll be fine. In any case, once your status is decided, you'll be issued a gun officially."

Bagdash gave a little laugh and put the gun into his jacket's inner breast pocket, positioning it so that it wouldn't be noticeable. Saluting Yang, he turned back toward the door. And then, his face froze for the first time.

Julian Mintz's sharp gaze was penetrating Bagdash's face like an arrow. He had a gun in his hand, and it was pointed with precision right at Bagdash's heart.

Bagdash cleared his throat loudly and showed Julian both of his hands, waving them. "Whoa, whoa. Don't look at me like that. I understand if you were watching. It was a joke. There's no way I would shoot Admiral Yang. I owe him."

"Can you say you weren't serious, not even for an instant?"

"What?"

"If you were to kill Admiral Yang, your name would go down in history—even if it wouldn't be in a good way. Can you honestly tell me the temptation didn't run through your mind?"

"Now wait just a minute ..." Bagdash said in a low voice.

There was no opening in Julian's stance, and unable to move so much as a finger, Bagdash just stood there.

"Admiral Yang, please say something," said Julian, finally asking for help. But before Yang could answer, Julian shouted, "Admiral, I don't trust this man. Even if he swears loyalty now, there's no way to know what he'll do in the future."

Yang tossed his documents aside, threw both legs up on his desk, and crossed his arms.

"Future danger is no reason to kill somebody in the present, Julian."

"I know that. But I've got a good reason."

"Which is?"

"While still a prisoner, he took a gun belonging to Admiral Yang Wen-li and tried to assassinate the admiral with it. That's deserving of death."

As Bagdash stared at Julian's ruthless expression, beads of sweat broke out on his face. Julian's argument would convince almost anyone. It struck him then that

he had been put in an untenable position that he couldn't have even imagined.

Yang laughed.

"It's all right. Surely you can let a little thing like that go. Bagdash has been scared long enough, too. Don't you feel sorry for him? Lazy bum's sweating, isn't he?"

"But, Admiral ..."

"It's okay, Julian. Commander, that'll be all. You can go now."

Julian lowered the gun, but the eyes staring at Bagdash were no less harsh and pointed. The commander took a deep breath.

"Well, well, you're scarier than you look, kid," Bagdash said on his way out. "I'll be sure not to forget that your eyes are on my back."

Julian turned back toward his legal guardian with dissatisfaction. "Admiral, if you had just given the order, I wouldn't have let that man walk out of here."

"It's fine. Bagdash is a man who knows his arithmetic. As long as I keep winning, he's not going to betray us. For now, that's enough. And besides ..."

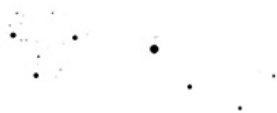
Yang lowered his legs, which had been propped up on his desk.

"Insofar as it's possible, I don't want to force you to kill people."

Yang knew that he was being selfish. After all, he was forcing the sons of other households to kill. But still, that was where Yang's feelings honestly lay.



They were already into July by the time word of the Stadium Massacre on Heinessen slipped through the netting of broadcast controls and made its way to Yang. When Yang learned of Jessica Edwards's death, he said not a word on the subject. He put on his sunglasses and hid his eyes from view, and not once did he remove them all that day. The following day, his appearance and bearing were no different than usual.



Yang, having secured the environment behind him, now turned his attention toward Heinessen, the fourth planet of the Baalat system. It was the end of July when he began to move the fleet, and it was clear to see that this deployment would settle things one way or the other with regard to the rebellion. No one among the fleet was able to conceal their anxiety but Yang himself.

CHAPTER 6

VALOR AND FIDELITY

at the beginning of July, an order went out to Siegfried Kircheis, who was spearheading a detachment far removed from Reinhard to gain control of the outlying stellar regions.

Kircheis had been given full discretion over tactical administration of the occupied territories under his command. Some even called him, half-jokingly, the “Backwater King.” Not that anyone would have said this to his face, of course.

Backed by the young imperial marshal’s full confidence, the redheaded youth had worked diligently to subdue the frontier. Although there had been no large-scale combat, he had scored resounding victories in each of the more than sixty battles he had fought. He allowed citizens of the planets he occupied to govern themselves, while doing everything in his power to safeguard interplanetary security among them. His strict ban on the plundering of captured territory distinguished him from the usual brass and made a big impression on the population.

It was why Reinhard had given him the task in the first place.

After reading over his orders, Kircheis called for his two vice admirals, August Samuel Wahlen and Kornelias Lutz.

They may have been older, but then again, there was not a single admiral to be found in either the empire or the alliance who was younger than Reinhard and Kircheis.

“What’s the matter, Commander?”

“Pardon me, but I have received orders for us from Marquis von Lohengramm.” Despite his higher status, the redheaded youth knew to comport himself with respect around his elders. “Due to the discord between him and Duke von Braunschweig, Marquis von Littenheim is currently leading a fleet of fifty thousand ships our way. While this is nominally for the purpose of recapturing the frontier stellar regions, we can safely say it’s really a cover for factional activities. We have been ordered to engage and destroy.”

Lutz and Wahlen were ill at ease. It would be their first confrontation with such a large force in this civil war.

Some vital intelligence gathering revealed that von Littenheim’s forces had occupied the Kifeuser system—and specifically Garmisch Fortress within it—as

their base of operations.

“A decisive battle awaits us in the Kifeuser system. When the time comes, I will lead a detachment of eight hundred ships from the main fleet.”

“Only eight hundred ships?”

Wahlen and Lutz widened their eyes at this figure. Kircheis nodded, calm as ever.

Although the enemy had deployed fifty thousand vessels, they were not deployed in formations according to function. Instead, a hodgepodge of military vessels of varying degrees of firepower and maneuverability—high-speed cruisers next to gunships, battleships side by side with torpedo boats—mingled in chaotic disarray. All of this connoted a lack of consistency in both the enemy’s tactical planning and chain of command.

“It’s an undisciplined mob, is what it is. We’ve no reason to fear,” declared Kircheis.

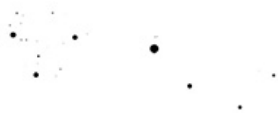
Lutz and Wahlen met the enemy head-on. Rather than take the front line, they opted for an echelon formation, with Lutz pushing out on port and Wahlen falling back on starboard. In the event the enemy attacked them en masse, Lutz was to engage first. In the time it took Wahlen to join the fray, Kircheis would swing his own eight hundred cruisers around to the enemy’s right flank. Then, once Wahlen had entered combat, Kircheis would charge the enemy’s nerve center, deliver a crippling blow, and exit from the left flank. In that moment of confusion, Lutz and Wahlen were to go on an all-out offensive.

“We can most likely win with this strategy—we just need to take care not to pursue them too far in afterward.”

The young redhead cocked a grin at his two vice admirals. It was all Lutz and Wahlen could do to hide their astonishment. As he proposed this formidable cut-and-run attack, a tactical plan that had the commander himself leading the charge, this seemingly mild-mannered young man smiled without the slightest air of nervousness.

One should expect nothing less of Marquis von Lohengramm’s most trusted retainer, they thought. Once again he had made a deep impression, proving that his ascendancy was more than just a benefit of being von Lohengramm’s childhood friend.

Kircheis’s plan was to take Yang Wen-li’s strategy of dividing his entire fleet into high-speed expeditionary and rear support forces, and deploy it at the tactical level in its most acute configuration.



Von Littenheim’s main battery volley acted as overture to the Battle of Kifeuser’s first act. Thousands upon thousands of striations of light spanned the dark void, bearing down on the energy-neutralization fields that enveloped Kircheis’s forces. Particles annihilated one another, and Kircheis’s fleet was gradually engulfed in a spectral fog.

Kircheis’s fleet held a diagonal formation and advanced with caution. Before

long, Lutz's portside fleet opened its gun bays at a distance of six million kilometers.

A dramatic cloudburst of energy stormed down on the von Littenheim fleet. Explosives etched a mosaic of light as Lutz's fleet at last made contact with the enemy, and the close-range combat of dogfighting walküren was added to what had thus far been a battle fought with cannons.

Wahlen's fleet was still at some remove from the enemy, catching only a negligible amount of the gunfire.

Kircheis stood up from his captain's chair on the flagship *Barbarossa* and cleared his high-speed fleet of eight hundred for launch. They set out in the shadow of Wahlen's advancing forces, waiting for the right moment to emerge, tracing an arc to strike von Littenheim where it would hurt the most.

Even as they turned to face the enemy's massive oncoming fleet, von Littenheim's forces were overtaken by gunfire from an unexpected direction. Commands to return fire flew, and the ships' bows turned to meet the surprise attack squad. Only this time, beams and missiles in great numbers rushed in on them from the front. Wahlen's fleet, now within range, had begun its attack.

Mayhem swept through von Littenheim's forces as they scrambled to figure out whom to deal with first. It was more than Kircheis could have hoped for.

The flagship *Barbarossa*'s main battery launched three successive volleys. Blades of light cut through a row of von Littenheim's ships. This chain of explosions resolved into a gaping hole at the center of the fleet, granting *Barbarossa* access as it stormed into the midst of its adversaries. Eight hundred ships did likewise.

An enormous wedge had been driven down the middle of von Littenheim's forces, moving with blinding speed. Von Littenheim's admirals attempted to surround the invaders, but unable to reckon with their celerity and deft maneuvers, their losses only grew. Kircheis's fleet emerged from the port flank of the enemy column once, and with that alone the strategy had been successful. Even so, they altered course and breached the enemy's core again. Kircheis and his eight hundred-strong fleet corkscrewed into the great army's vulnerable heart.

Chaos and confusion escalated. Once it spread to the perimeter of the fleet, Lutz and Wahlen charged with everything they had. As the mayhem from within collided with that from without, von Littenheim's army faced certain defeat. Their flagship *Ostmark* was detected at close range by Kircheis's ships.

"That's Marquis von Littenheim's flagship. Don't let it get away. I want the ringleader who started this war!"

As Kircheis shot out his orders over FTL, the entire fleet charged the enemy flagship, their only goal being total victory.

Marquis von Littenheim winced at the images on his screen as his allied battleships were reduced to clouds of white heat amid the hail of concentrated fire. As contact with his flagship grew imminent, his consternation turned into terror. By its commander's order, now bordering on a scream, the *Ostmark* shifted course, as if out of madness, and fled.

If I'm going to fight with a brat, I would rather it had been the gold-haired one. That redheaded henchman of his is hardly up to snuff, but he'll have to do.

Those were the words Marquis von Littenheim had uttered before trading

blows with Kircheis.

Marquis von Littenheim's boasting had been lost somewhere in the battle zone. Before he could withdraw, countless specks of light appeared before him. A fleet of his supply vessels had been stationed at the rear in preparation for prolonged battle. But now, to Marquis von Littenheim, they were nothing more than an obstacle in his path of retreat.

"Open fire!"

The gunnery officer could hardly believe his ears.

"But they're on our side, Your Excellency. To fire on them now would mean ..."

"If they're on our side, then why are they blocking my escape—I mean, our change of course? I don't care who they are. Fire! I said fire!"

Thus did the Battle of Kifeuser give rise to even greater tragedy. An unarmed supply fleet was attacked by its own for the sole purpose of opening an escape route. It was a grotesque symbol of the absurdity of war itself.

Aware that its allies were taking flight, the supply fleet slowly changed course. In the middle of that maneuver, however, the operators cried out with shock.

"Energy waves and missiles are rapidly approaching! Evasive maneuvers impossible!"

"The enemy?"

It was only natural that the officers should have reacted this way. Situated as they were in the rear, they expected to be spared from the cross fire, which could only mean that enemies had been lurking nearby.

"No, our allies are—"

A flash eradicated them all before the man could finish his last utterance.

The vessel which had now been sacrificed to friendly fire was the *Passau 3*, attacked by neutron warheads deployed from rail cannons.

In a single moment, a raging storm of neutrons filled the ship, felling the entire crew.

It meant an almost instant death. Only one man, a Sergeant Kurlich, who had been inspecting provisions in the ship's cargo hold, managed to survive a few seconds longer, surrounded as he was by a thick inner wall and shipping containers.

The sergeant fell to the floor, unable to comprehend what had happened to him. Had the main fleet not been shielding them? Who could possibly have attacked them? Or had there been some sort of accident?

In any case, he had to get up. To go outside and ascertain what had happened. To live and return home, where his wife and newborn twins were waiting for him.

He couldn't get up, however. A fleck of purple appeared on the back of the sergeant's hand as he clung to the wall. The fleck grew larger, covering his skin and bubbling until it penetrated his biological tissues down to the very last cell.



At the moment of the explosion, Lieutenant Rinser of the *Düren 8* supply vessel

was thrown against a wall. He felt a piercing-hot pain in his right arm just before losing consciousness.

When he came to, he found himself surrounded by smoke and corpses. He coughed violently, losing his balance as he tried getting to his feet. He looked down at his own body and especially his right arm, now missing from the elbow down.

During the explosion, a piece of flying debris had severed it. His muscles had immediately contracted from the suddenness of it all, resulting in surprisingly little pain and bleeding.

"Is anyone there?" Lieutenant Rinser called out, sitting on the floor. His third such attempt yielded a feeble response, and a small-framed figure came staggering over to him.

Rinser raised his eyebrows. Underneath the disheveled golden hair was a face—only that of a boy—caked with blood and ash.

"What's a boy your age doing in a place like this?"

"... I'm a student. I was on my way to Garmisch Fortress for assignment as a cabin attendant."

"Ah, I see. And how old are you?"

"I'm thirteen—or will be in five days."

"The world really must be ending when mere children start showing up in war zones."

The lieutenant breathed a sigh and, realizing it *wasn't* the end of the world, knew that his and the boy's wounds needed attention. He indicated where there was a first aid kit and had the boy bring it to him.

After numbing his pain receptors with a cooling spray, he disinfected the wound and wrapped it in protective gauze. The boy's bruises and abrasions, along with his first-degree burns, showed that fate had been on his side. The boy gasped at the single screen that had managed to avoid being damaged.

"It looks like the enemy is approaching."

"Enemy?" said the lieutenant warily. "Just who is this enemy? The ones who did this to us are—"

As he stood up, struggling for balance, Rinser activated the emergency signal system and pushed a green button.

"I hereby surrender. We have injured on board and seek asylum in the name of humanity."

Humanity. The lieutenant curled his lips. If rescuing the enemy was humanity, then what did you call killing your own comrades?

"Are you going to surrender?"

"You disagree, boy?"

"Please don't call me 'boy.' I do have a proper name. It's Konrad von Moder."

"Well, that's a coincidence. I'm Konrad, too. Konrad Rinser. If the young Konrad thinks that surrendering is out of the question, then what do you propose we do instead?" said the elder Konrad derisively.

The boy's face went red with embarrassment.

"I don't know. I would feel sad to surrender, but it's not like we can fight, either. I'm lost."

"Then leave it to me," said Rinser, awkwardly opening a bottle of rubbing alcohol with his remaining hand. "I'm fourteen years older than you, which

comes out to fourteen more years of wisdom and experience. Not that any of that wisdom helped me to see my own commander's true colors."

The other Konrad watched—half-amazed, half-worried—as the young lieutenant tipped back the rubbing alcohol like a bottle of wine.

"Hey, don't you look at me like that. Medicinal purposes only. It's never failed me yet."

The sound of a buzzer overlapped with the end of the lieutenant's sentence. Relief had come.

Enemy relief.

II

Though Marquis von Littenheim had made his escape to Garmisch Fortress, his fleet had been almost completely destroyed. Among his fifty thousand ships, three thousand had hightailed it to Garmisch, while five thousand, after fleeing the battle zone, had scattered to random locations. Eighteen thousand had been annihilated, while the remainder had been summarily captured or had surrendered. Marquis von Littenheim's disgraceful hit-and-run against allied ships had dampened the morale of his men.

Kircheis had Garmisch Fortress surrounded and was hastening preparations to take it by force when a single POW requested an audience. The young officer, still in his twenties, had yet to be fitted with an artificial hand, and the right sleeve of his uniform dangled loosely.

"I believe I can be of use to you, Your Excellency," Lieutenant Rinser said by way of introduction.

"How so?"

"I suspect you already know. I am a living witness to the fact that Marquis von Littenheim killed his subordinates to save himself."

"I see. So you were aboard one of the supply ships."

"My arm was blown off in the attack. I say we show this," he said, holding up the stump of his arm, "to the men in the fortress."

"I take it your loyalty to Marquis von Littenheim was blown off with it?"

"Loyalty?" Rinser's voice took on a cynical key. "That word has a beautiful ring to it—but one too often abused out of convenience. I think this civil war is a good opportunity for all of us to reconsider the value of loyalty. Now millions of people will see that certain kinds of leaders have no right to demand the loyalty of their subjects."

Kircheis acknowledged the lieutenant's point. To be sure, loyalty had never been a thing to be given unconditionally. It was necessary for its recipient to be worthy of it.

"Very well, then. I hereby request your cooperation. Send an FTL to the men of Garmisch asking for their surrender."

"Understood ..."

Complicated feelings gleamed in the lieutenant's eyes.

"If even five men within the fortress share our sentiments, then Marquis von Littenheim's head will have already rolled."

Garmisch Fortress held its collective breath. Its commander, Marquis von Littenheim, was overwhelmed by fear and looming defeat. Furthermore, he had descended into a spiral of shame over his own behavior and his loss of face regarding von Braunschweig, and had taken to the bottle for solace.

It had been half a day since Marquis von Littenheim's escape when a single warship that had managed to escape Kircheis's pursuit at last approached the fortress, and a lone officer appeared before the marquis.

The officer's head was wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage, and a body—in truth, the upper half of one—was slung over his right shoulder.

This hulking officer walked up the silent corridor, for the guards dared not call out to him, and stopped before the sentries before speaking.

"I am Commander Rauditz of the Wesel sniper battalion. I wish to see Marquis von Littenheim."

The sentry leader swallowed audibly.

"I would be happy to intermediate, but with that filthy, bloody body, I can't allow you to ..."

"Filthy, you say?!" The commander's eyes flared with menace. After a breath, his harsh words resounded throughout the hall. "Filthy! These are the remains of the marquis's loyal subject! This was my subordinate, who risked his life battling the enemy so that the Marquis could escape."

Daunted by the lieutenant's resolve, to say nothing of the corpse, the guards parted as Rauditz stepped forward.

The door opened to reveal Marquis von Littenheim's figure seated at the other end of a table.

"What are you doing here, you impudent fool!"

The tabletop was a veritable forest of wine bottles and glasses. The marquis's skin had lost the tautness and luster of the day before, his eyes were now dark and bloodshot, and even the edge in his voice had dulled.

"Private Paulus ... this is Marquis von Littenheim, the man you threw your life away for. Reward him with a kiss of gratitude for his loyalty!"

Before he had even finished, the commander threw Paulus's body with all the strength he could muster at their commander.

Having no time to dodge, Marquis von Littenheim held out his arms, catching the soldier's body out of reflex.

With an indecipherable scream, Marquis von Littenheim toppled from his luxurious seat to the floor. Realizing the dead soldier was still in his arms, he let out a rather different kind of scream and heaved the body aside. The commander guffawed loudly.

"Kill him! Kill this ingrate now!" Marquis von Littenheim cried.

The lieutenant held his ground. On his face, caked with dried blood and oil, his lips contorted into a strange smile in defiance of the blasters aimed at him ...

The crewmen of the bridge directed their attention to the main displays.

The silver globe of Garmisch Fortress floated in the centers of both viewscreens. A section of the outer wall erupted in a white flash, followed by eruptions of dull but massive beams of red and yellow light.

"It exploded."

The operator had only stated the obvious, but the men nonetheless watched the image before them in a stupor.

"That's near the command center."

Lieutenant Rinser lowered his voice for some reason.

"I see. Very well, then."

Kircheis did not want to squander the opportunity afforded him. He ordered his entire fleet to surround and bombard the fortress before dispatching landing ships and armed soldiers.

What little resistance they met with was sporadic. The soldiers, bereft of their will to fight, disregarded officers' angry roars and forfeited their weapons in succession. Commanding officers, too, realizing the futility of any resistance, held up their hands in surrender.

Kircheis occupied the fortress—or, rather, the three-fourths of it spared from the explosion. Not even Marquis von Littenheim's corpse was recovered, scattered in all directions as it had likely been by an inferno of combusted Seffl particles.

In one fell swoop, the nobles' confederated forces had lost their second-in-command and a third of their military strength.

III

"The aristocratic forces are big on spirit, small on strategy."

So the heterochromatic Oskar von Reuentahl had once said.

Hot-blooded imbeciles, all of them—a harsh evaluation, to be sure, but one that the battles fought thus far seemed to be confirming with the large number of military successes he and his comrades were scoring.

Even so, when battling with enemy forces in the Schan'n-tau Stellar Region, von Reuentahl had discovered something unexpected that forced him to change his thinking.

Hot-blooded as ever. And yet, he couldn't help but recognize that they were efficiently organized and cleverly controlled. Von Reuentahl had repelled three waves of enemy aggression but was amazed by their tenacity and the cohesive coordination with which they launched their offensive. The losses incurred were greater than expected, and for von Reuentahl, the time had come to deliberate.

Von Reuentahl understood right away that a change of command was behind the enemy's newfound efficacy, as it was likely Merkatz who now stood on the front lines. Outside of him, there was no one else among the aristocrats' confederated forces capable of mobilizing troops so effectively.

Which meant that von Reuentahl was at a disadvantage only so far as a

difference of military strength was concerned. He may not have been a visionary, but he could rightly assess the capabilities of his adversaries.

“Should we withdraw?”

Deciding to retreat when one should: also the mark of a great commander.

Even abandoning Schan’n-tau was, strategically speaking, not much of a problem. It wasn’t an indispensable tactical stronghold but only a blip on his expanding radar of influence. Though he wouldn’t mind folding his cards in this instance, von Reuentahl hesitated to make any snap judgments so that he might better make a lasting psychological impression on his opponents.

After a string of defeats and withdrawals, acquisition of the Schan’n-tau Stellar Region would give the appearance of victory to the confederated aristocrats. The latter’s esprit de corps would rise, and they would meet their next battle riding its wave. Pluck and spirit could often overcome an opponent’s careful planning and lead to victory; history was full of examples.

A malicious smile appeared suddenly in the brooding von Reuentahl’s blue and black eyes.

“Very well, we’ll withdraw. Schan’n-tau’s not worth the lives it would cost to defend. We’ll leave the recapture to Marquis von Lohengramm.”

If a superior officer lost a sector occupied by a subordinate, the superior officer would completely lose face. On the other hand, if a sector occupied by a subordinate were to be rescued by a superior officer, the end result would prove the superior officer to have abilities far beyond those of the subordinate. The superior officer would likely be irritated by the temporary setback, but if he said, “It’s beyond my ability. Please show me the true worth of your tactics,” that would inflate the superior officer’s pride and leave a great impression in the long run.

So von Reuentahl had reckoned. Since an overwhelming victory was not to be hoped for, that seemed the wisest course of action. It wasn’t a calculation that your average headstrong, self-interested military man could have come up with.

So deciding, von Reuentahl commenced preparations for retreat. With Merkatz as his opponent, it wouldn’t be so easy. This promised to be the defining moment of his tactical career.

On July 9, von Reuentahl set out on the offensive. At various points, he concentrated his military force and dealt the enemy damage everywhere he went.

The confederated forces of the aristocrats, however, were showing none of their former disorder, systematically intercepting their fire as they were. Seeing that von Reuentahl’s front lines had been stretched to their limits, they launched a precise counterattack. This alone showed just how skilled a commander Merkatz was.

Von Reuentahl made no attempt to respond in kind and instead pulled his central fleet backward. In the meantime, remaining forces were changing their angles ever so slightly and spreading out laterally. These maneuvers were conducted in concert, if only for the sake of show. Had one looked at them from the proper vantage point, the von Reuentahl forces would have been seen assuming a concave formation, flanking the enemy on three sides.

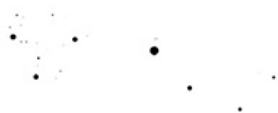
Merkatz’s staff officers were also aware of this. To their commander, they proposed that they should reduce their speed of advance so as not to pander to the enemy’s strategy.

On his flagship's bridge, Merkatz crossed his arms, the movements of von Reuentahl's army reflected unnaturally in his eyes. Von Reuentahl was a formidable tactician in his own right, and Merkatz wondered if all this fighting wasn't just some ruse to throw them off as they made their escape ...

In the end, Merkatz heeded the advice of his advisors. Because of his allies' impetuous temperament, the cause of so many headaches, Merkatz had to be discreet when it came to tactics. If von Reuentahl did indeed intend to escape, then he could secure the Schan'n-tau Stellar Region without any further bloodshed. It would have been different if the opponent had been Reinhard himself, but since that wasn't the case, he wanted to avoid a dangerous gamble.

The aristocratic forces had slowed their pursuit. This von Reuentahl verified, and without dropping his guard, he flexibly adjusted his concave formation while making a careful withdrawal. His forces soon reached Schan'n-tau's outer rim, and when the distance between enemy and ally widened, he quickly reorganized his entire fleet into a defensive spherical formation and fled at maximum speed.

The Schan'n-tau Stellar Region had fallen into the hands of the confederated forces.



"That von Reuentahl has dumped everything in my lap, has he?"

Upon hearing the report, Reinhard gave a wry smile. He understood all too well von Reuentahl's decision to abandon Schan'n-tau.

Of course, to Reinhard, a broad-minded soul like von Reuentahl's was more appealing than that of the simple military man who only grasped things on a tactical level. Allegiance could not be expected of such a man if it went unrewarded; to be his superior officer required constant demonstration of the talent and capability befitting his station. Reinhard rather liked that feeling of tension between superior and subordinate. It was because he did that even the charmless von Oberstein was able to work under him.

It was that same von Oberstein who now spoke.

"Admiral Merkatz has been renowned as a soldier since before you were born, Your Excellency. Things might get a bit troublesome if he's been given free rein."

"Free rein? But there's the rub. I don't think Duke von Braunschweig is clever enough to let Merkatz off his leash."

"As you say. The opponent we face isn't Admiral Merkatz but the ones pulling the strings above him."

IV

Upon his return to Gaiesburg, Merkatz was showered with all manner of flowery platitudes from his ecstatic brethren, but he returned not even a hint of a smile.

"It's not so much that our forces acquired it as our enemy relinquished it. We must never overestimate our own abilities."

A clichéd speech, even for you, Merkatz thought to himself, but seeing the uncertainty in these noblemen's eyes, he felt like he had no choice but to start with the basics.

"I see. You're a cautious man, Admiral," said Duke von Braunschweig with a trace of annoyance. *A dull man is more like it*, he surely thought—which wasn't all that far from the truth, as Merkatz didn't feel anything. Whether such a trait was a plus or minus, he couldn't say. Despite being decorated many times over, his dullness had likely gotten in the way of his becoming an imperial marshal. Then again, such tendencies might very well have been what had until now kept him from being ensnared in the usual conspiracies that went on at court.

At the end of July, an old-fashioned challenge to duel was sent from Reinhard to the nobles at Gaiesburg Fortress.

The challenge was replayed before the aristocratic forces' top men on the VTR, and its message was more than enough to fuel their rage.

"Witless and cowardly noblemen," Reinhard said to them. "Had you even the courage found in the tip of a rat's tail, you would leave the comfort of your fortress and fight gloriously. And if you lack even that much courage, you would do well to abandon your baseless pride and surrender. It's the only way to save your lives. I'll not only allow you to live, I'll even let you keep enough of your fortunes to feed those blithering mouths of yours. Marquis von Littenheim died a miserable death the other day, as a man of his cowardly nature surely deserved. Should you not wish to meet the same fate, even your feeble minds can figure out the better path to choose at this juncture ..."

"How dare that brat speak to us like that?"

The young nobles went nearly insane with anger. That was exactly what Reinhard wanted. When one's opponents lost their reason so easily, an obvious challenge like that was more than sufficient—that Merkatz begrudgingly acknowledged. Among the young nobles, there was even one who blew off steam by beating his soldiers with an electric whip. That youth had been amusing himself since childhood by whipping the serfs on his father's lands.

Soon thereafter, Mittermeier's fleet, the vanguard of Reinhard's forces, began haunting the region surrounding Gaiesburg Fortress. These were clear provocations. They would parade themselves just out of range of their cannons, drawing in closer and then pulling away, pulling away and then drawing in closer.

Merkatz explicitly forbade a sortie of any kind. There was surely some terrifying trick lurking behind Mittermeier's seemingly childish game. Though he explained this to the noblemen, they simply wouldn't listen.

On the third day, they finally snapped. A group of young aristocrats disobeyed the prohibition order and launched an attack on Mittermeier's fleet.

Mittermeier's forces were seemingly caught off guard and easily fell into disarray. Mittermeier managed to escape, abandoning a considerable amount of armaments in the process. At least, that's how it seemed in the eyes of the young nobles.

"He's a quick one to blow away. Really puts the 'gale' in 'Gale Wolf,' doesn't he?"

"You call that a trap? There was nothing to it. Admiral Merkatz is too cautious for his own good."

Having secured military vessels and supplies in massive quantities, the young nobles made a triumphant return, their chests puffed out with pride. A harshly worded notice, however, awaited them on their return.

“You’ve all gone against the commander’s forbiddance, engaging the enemy when you knew you shouldn’t. A grave transgression, indeed. You’ll be judged in full accordance with military law. I’ll need you to hand over your insignias and your sidearms. Prepare to be court-martialed.”

It was only natural that Merkatz should adhere to protocol. Though they had emerged victorious, ignoring a commander’s order might prove detrimental in the future.

The young nobles were naturally filled with discontent. They had already inhaled the fumes of victory and carried themselves like heroes. Baron Flegel, who held the rank of rear admiral, tore off his insignia and threw it to the floor, shrieking like the lead in some classical tragedy.

“We’re not afraid to die. It’s one thing to do battle with the enemy and to fall on the battlefield, but to be judged by a commander who possesses neither bravery nor pride is more than I can stand. Spare me your court-martial. Let me kill myself right here, right now!”

“Rear Admiral Flegel speaks for all of us!” chorused the young aristocrats. “We mustn’t let him die alone. Let us all kill ourselves so that posterity may know the pride of the imperial nobles!”

It was narcissism to the extreme. Duke von Braunschweig did not rebuke them for it.

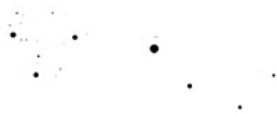
“As this is not a matter of *battle*, it is ultimately my right and my duty, as leader, to pass judgment.”

Since learning of Marquis von Littenheim’s death, almost all he had done was stick his nose into Merkatz’s decision making. He stood before these excited young men, speaking in his booming voice.

“Gentlemen, your courage and pride have shown everyone the true essence of imperial nobility. You have dealt a crushing blow to those conceited commoners. We have no need to fear Mittermeier, or even that golden-haired brat assuming the titles of marquis and imperial marshal. We *will* be victorious. And by winning, we will show them that justice is on our side. Long live the empire!”

“Long live the empire!” came the young noblemen’s enthusiastic cheers.

Merkatz had nothing more to say. Perhaps that was the moment his disappointment turned into despair.



“Any minute now, von Oberstein,” said Reinhard.

Indeed, nodded the chief advisor with the artificial eyes.

After gathering in the flagship *Brünhild*, the admirals were given precise instructions for leading their fleets into their respective theaters of war.

It was August 15 when news of Mittermeier's rapid approach reached Gaiesburg Fortress. Unlike before, today Mittermeier would be actively attacking with long-range hydrogen missiles.

"The defeated general has come yet again for another shameless loss. Mark my words: no matter how many times he fights, one who loses only begets more loss."

They had already come to disregard Merkatz's commands and rules. They boarded their warships and, not waiting for the space controller's instructions, scrambled to be the first to attack.

True to form, Mittermeier was unable to keep himself from sneering.

"If only those idiotic sons of the aristocracy had stayed in their hole, they could have lived longer. Did they come out only to turn into so much space dust?"

Though he was of the same generation as "those idiotic sons of the aristocracy," his combat experience and accolades were far greater than those of any of them.

Fighting against a gang who couldn't even see through the ruse of his previous mock retreat bordered on the absurd.

However, that day they had had it confirmed that Duke von Braunschweig was also heading their way. Mittermeier's responsibility was therefore enormous. He would have to endure two or three more such farces before the enemy caught on.

Both fleets clashed.

Innumerable cannons unleashed innumerable striations of light. These directional energies knocked out ships on both sides, crushing them, and rays of light from bursting explosions were rent asunder by new lights as well.

It was a short-lived battle, however, as Mittermeier's army commenced its gradual retreat, choosing not to fight back against the all-out attack from the aristocratic forces.

"Such a disgrace. They've run away so many times it's not even a point of shame for them anymore. Let's finish the fools with one blow. Let's seize the golden brat and hang him from the rafters."

The noblemen let out a cheer, eagerly rushing to their warships.

There was, however, one man who harbored suspicions about Mittermeier's flaccidity. Vice Admiral Fahrenheit, a formidable officer who had shared the battlefield with Reinhard and Merkatz, maintained an equal distance between Duke von Braunschweig and Merkatz, and bade caution to his young, hot-blooded allies.

"Keep your distance—it may be a trap."

Which was fully possible. They had to be prepared.

Sure enough, when the aristocratic forces held off on their pursuit, Mittermeier came at them with a sudden counterattack. The aristocrats responded in kind, continuing to fight as Mittermeier retreated—thus urging the aristocrats forward. They repeated this dance numerous times. Mittermeier's timing was nothing short of exquisite.

In this manner, the confederated forces were lured deeper and deeper into the heart of the formation that Reinhard and von Oberstein had carefully laid out for them. The front lines were stretched to their limits, and once the enemy's

communications were likewise adversely affected, Mittermeier again laid into them.

This again? When the overconfident aristocrats, watching idly, attempted a counterstrike, Mittermeier's forces closed in on them with unbelievable speed and power, pulverizing their lead group with the first blow.

Many noblemen were reduced to plumes of fire along with their warships without ever knowing what had happened to them. By the time operators of those ships that had survived the first attack cried out that the situation had changed, their surroundings had already become a panorama of destruction and slaughter. Fragments of warships blown up by direct beam attacks glittered like shards of stained glass as their fleets were buffeted by waves of nuclear blasts.

"Do you see now, you foolish children? This is how we fight. Remember that for as long as you can in those primitive brains of yours."

Mittermeier was going to savor his revenge to the fullest. Compared to the finger painting of the young nobles, his command of battle was a work of art.

The aristocrats' confederated forces fell in column after column of ships, their chain of command having fallen apart well before that. In the face of Mittermeier's ingenious tactics, they were doomed to be picked off one by one.

Resistance was, of course, not a viable option as one ship, and then another, was added to the festival of carnage.

"Retreat, retreat! Forget about the others—get out while you can!"

Fahrenheit, seeing the unfavorable turn of events, ordered a swift retreat, and the noblemen were eager to follow suit.

Waves of brilliant gunfire, however, assailed the remaining forces from either side, fired simultaneously by Admiral Kempf from the left and Admiral Mecklinger from the right.

The confederate forces disintegrated further with every passing second, their glorious columns of ships gradually losing density.

The nobles took flight. When at last they thought they were safe from Kempf's onslaught, Wittenfeld and Müller's fleets closed in on either side. In an instant, the panicking aristocrats were transformed, ships and all, into masses of wreckage drifting in space.

On the bridge of the flagship *Brünhild*, Reinhard wore a smile of satisfaction. Foreseeing the enemy's escape route, he had laid an ambush. In this case, because said route was the same taken during the initial advance, the prediction had been an easy one to make. They would forgo intercepting their path of escape so as to stave off any last-ditch counterattack. Letting the enemy vanguard go past, they had attacked from the front and the rear. This not only gave them a positional advantage but also allowed them to psychologically overwhelm their enemies more effectively with them on the run compared to a pitched battle.

"Dead or alive," said Reinhard, "I want Duke von Braunschweig brought before me. Whoever succeeds in doing this, even if a mere cadet, will be made an admiral and rewarded handsomely. Seize your chance!"

Their fighting spirit was now enhanced by greed. The noble confederates, who had lost their will to fight and run away, were now nothing more than game for hunters. With nowhere left to go, they were captured and destroyed at the end of each short, desperate counterattack.

When Duke von Braunschweig came to himself, there was not a single allied

vessel in the vicinity of his flagship, and the innumerable points of light that were Mittermeier's and von Reuentahl's fleets were approaching from behind. A violent impact rocked his ship as a single rail-cannon shell blew off his rear gun turret completely. The lance of an energy beam grazed the body of his ship, shaving off an outer wall and sending up billows of metal dust. The gargantuan, invisible hand of death had taken hold of his vessel.

Just then, an enormous wall of light appeared ahead of him. Merkatz, concealed in the rear guard, showered the pursuing enemy with close-range volleys. Mittermeier and von Reuentahl hurriedly gave orders to pull back, but the intensity of their charge and the mentality of their officers, whose will to fight far outweighed their calm, meant that the command went partially unheeded.

Seeing his enemy's sudden confusion, Merkatz gave orders to his fleet, which was in perfect formation to attack. With no bigger warships at his disposal, his force of destroyers, torpedo boats, and single-seat walküren was most suited for close combat.

These tore into Reinhard's confused forces, destroying with utmost precision ships that had been forced into a tight formation. Now it was Reinhard's vanguard forces that had ships bursting apart in balls of flame. It was all they could do to defend themselves, and pursuit was now out of the question.

Von Reuentahl and Mittermeier ground their teeth both in frustration at having lost Duke von Braunschweig after cornering him so well and in anger at the pitiful state of their own formations. Even so, they knew the foolishness of surrendering to emotion in the heat of battle. Shouting blistering words of reprimand all the while, they shored up their vulnerable rows of ships, calling for simultaneous retreat and regrouping. For mediocre commanders, it would have been an impossible task.

Had Merkatz possessed sufficient force strength, he might well have driven both of these great admirals to utter defeat. His soldiers were few, however, and he himself harbored no such illusions. He would obey Duke von Braunschweig and withdraw as instructed.

"Merkatz certainly has the skill of his years. He's as strong as ever."

So did the young marshal praise the enemy admiral. In any case, the enemy had been driven back into Gaiesburg. There wasn't the slightest need for panic.

VI

"Why didn't you come to our aid sooner?" bellowed Duke von Braunschweig when he met with Merkatz again. These were the first words out of his mouth.

The face of the distinguished admiral did not change color. Rather, with an expression that said he'd expected this, he bowed his head in silence, even as the eyes of Lieutenant Commander von Schneider next to him flared with indignation and he took a step forward. Von Schneider's arm, however, was grabbed by the hand of the senior officer whom he served.

When they retired to a separate room, Merkatz remonstrated his aide, who was still trembling with anger.

"Don't be so upset. Duke von Braunschweig is unwell."

"Unwell?"

"Mentally speaking."

As Merkatz saw it, Duke von Braunschweig's pathology was that of one whose pride was easily wounded. He probably wasn't even aware of it himself, but he believed that he was a great and infallible presence, which made it impossible for him to feel gratitude toward others. He likewise could not acknowledge the ideas of those who thought differently from him. To him, such people were traitors, and any advice from them he interpreted as nothing less than slander. Consequently, although von Streit and Ferner had made plans on his behalf, not only were their ideas rejected, they had ultimately been forced to leave von Braunschweig's camp.

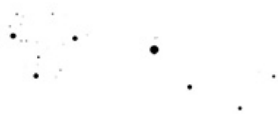
A man of his disposition would never recognize that society thrived on disparate ideas and values.

"It's an illness kept alive by a five hundred-year tradition of privilege for the nobility. You might say the duke is a victim. If he'd lived a hundred years ago, that way might have worked. He's an unfortunate man."

Von Schneider, who was still young, was not as tolerant or as resigned as his commander. He took his leave from Merkatz and rode an elevator up to the fortress observation room. The inorganic sparkle of overlapping star clusters shone far beyond the transparent dome.

"Duke von Braunschweig may well be an unfortunate man. But are not those whose futures lie in his hands all the more so ... ?"

To the young officer's discouraging question, the stars responded only with silence.



Within Gaiesburg Fortress, there was a man who had fled inside from the opposite direction as Duke von Braunschweig and the men. Baron von Scheidt, Duke von Braunschweig's nephew, had been assigned to protect and govern the planet of Westerland on his uncle's behalf.

Westerland was an arid world lacking in flora and water, but its population of two million was fairly large for such a remote territory. Intensive farming and harvesting of rare earth minerals was carried out at what few oases there were. Had it been a peaceful age, they might have transported a trillion tons of water to places that needed it, and development would have flourished.

Though Baron von Scheidt was not an entirely incompetent ruler, his youth made him rather obstinate when it came to policy. And because he had every intention of following his uncle's lead, his exploitation of the populace only intensified.

Until now, things had held steady in this way. With Reinhard's sudden rise to power, however, even the populace knew that the nobility's governing leash had slackened, giving rise to civil war. Shocked and outraged that popular opposition was gaining traction, von Scheidt tried to suppress the resistance, but internal pressures only mounted.

Following one back-and-forth too many, at last the populace launched a large-scale revolt to repay von Scheidt for his tyrannical rule. What few guards he had

were engulfed by the flood of angry citizens. Von Scheidt escaped by himself in a shuttle, but he had been seriously wounded, and he died from his injuries soon after his arrival at Gaiesburg.

“That insolent rabble ... How dare they kill my nephew with their filthy hands.”

How easily those with privilege denied the existence and individuality of those without it. Not only did Duke von Braunschweig not recognize the people’s right to resist oppressive rule, he didn’t even acknowledge their right to live without the permission of the boyar nobles. He was certain in his mind that those who were sick and elderly, or otherwise unable to serve nobility, were no better than diseased livestock and therefore had no value in living.

And to think that such lowly ingrates had opposed the highborn—and to the point of killing his own nephew! Duke von Braunschweig was beyond aggrieved and believed his anger to be perfectly justified.

He was determined to bring his self-described “blade of justice” down on those who had wronged him.

“Launch a nuclear attack on Westerland at once, and don’t let a single one of those ingrates survive.”

Not everyone approved. This was partly because a nuclear strike meant using thermonuclear weapons, a method leading to widespread fallout that had been taboo ever since the Thirteen-Day War had in antiquity nearly wiped out the entire human race on Earth. Commodore Ansbach, who knew this by virtue of his prudence, tried to dissuade his incensed leader.

“It’s only natural that you should feel angry, but Westerland is Your Excellency’s own territory. What use would there be in launching a nuclear strike?”

Duke von Braunschweig made no response.

“Besides, now that we face Marquis von Lohengramm, we don’t have enough military strength as it is. Killing all the inhabitants is going too far. Why not just punish their ringleaders instead?”

“Silence!” the duke roared. “Westerland is my territory. As such, it’s my right to blow away those mongrels as I see fit. Did not Rudolf the Great slaughter millions of insurgents so that he might lay the foundations of the empire?”

Realizing it was useless to try to persuade him, Ansbach took his leave with a sigh.

“The Goldenbaum Dynasty ends here. How can it continue to stand when it cuts off its own limbs?”

The moment these words reached von Braunschweig’s ears by way of an informant, the duke flew into a rage and had Ansbach arrested, but after considering his achievements and popularity, he decided to keep him in confinement instead of executing him.

Merkatz requested an audience with the duke, hoping to appeal for Ansbach’s release and an end to the plans for a nuclear attack on Westerland, but the duke wouldn’t hear of it.

Duke von Braunschweig advanced to the execution phase of his plan for revenge.

A soldier of Westerlandian origin escaped Gaiesburg and defected to the Reinhard camp the day before the nuclear strike was to be carried out.

Upon hearing him out, Reinhard was about to dispatch a fleet to Westerland in an attempt to prevent the attack when his Chief of Staff von Oberstein convinced him otherwise.

"I say we let Duke von Braunschweig, mad as he is, carry out his atrocity," he said coolly. "By recording him in the act, we prove the barbarism of the boyar nobles. No doubt, this will make the citizens and the common soldiers under their control defect. That would be far more efficient than getting in their way and stopping this."

The golden youth knew nothing of fear, yet he recoiled all the same.

"You want me to stand by as two million people die, women and children among them?"

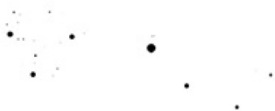
"If this civil war drags on any longer, even more people than that will die. And if the nobles should win, this kind of tragedy will occur many times. And so, by letting the entire empire know of their brutality, we'll show they have no right to rule the universe ..."

"So you're suggesting I turn a blind eye?"

"Do it for the sake of the twenty-five billion citizens of the empire, Your Excellency. And furthermore, for the swift establishment of your hegemony."

"... I understand."

Reinhard nodded. His face had lost its characteristic glow. If only Kircheis had been at his side. He would never have advised such drastic measures.



There were more than fifty oases scattered across the surface of Westerland. Excluding those, only mountains of reddish-brown rock, pale-yellow deserts, and white salt lakes—terrain where no soul resided—stretched to and beyond the horizon.

This meant that hitting it with nuclear missiles could achieve the complete genocide of the planet's two million inhabitants.

On that day, a meeting was taking place by one of those oases. Though they had driven out the nobles by their own strength, the insurgents had no plans in place for what to do next. Where should they go from here? How could they ensure the peace and happiness of their people? These were the main questions on their agenda. To those who had not engaged in independent debate for such a long time under noble rule, the meeting was an enormous undertaking and therefore something to celebrate.

"Is not Marquis von Lohengramm an ally of the people? Let's ask him to protect us."

When that opinion was offered, voices of approval arose from the crowd. It was their only hope. When the talk settled down, a small boy being held in his

mother's arms pointed up to the sky.

"Mommy, what's that?"

The people looked up to see a beam of light running diagonally across the cobalt sky.

A pure-white flash bleached the entire scene.

Immediately thereafter, a red dome rose up above the horizon, expanding rapidly to a height of ten thousand meters before forming a mushroom-shaped cloud of superheated ash.

The shock wave came at them as a tsunami of intense heat, traveling at seventy meters per second and surpassing temperatures of 800 degrees celsius, scorching the topsoil, the scant vegetation, the buildings, and the people's bodies. Clothing and hair burst into flames, and keloids formed on bubbling skin.

The screams of children burning alive hung in the searing air, then suddenly thinned out to silence. The voices of mothers calling out their children's names, of fathers fearing for their families, were cut short soon after.

Massive amounts of dirt flew high into the air, becoming a cascade of sand that poured down on the earth, providing a burial for two million charred corpses.



The young officers watching the monitor stood up from their seats, their faces pale as they heaved over and began to vomit onto the floor. No one could blame them. Everyone was silent, their eyes glued to the images being sent back by the reconnaissance probe. Only now did they realize that there was nothing that sullied the laws of the universe more than the strong preying on the weak.

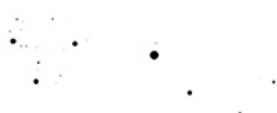
"We will beam these images throughout the empire. Even a child will understand that righteousness is on our side. The nobles have signed their own death warrant," von Oberstein explained in his usual monotone, to which there was no immediate response. "What's the matter, Your Excellency?"

Gloom hung heavily over Reinhard's expression.

"You told me to avert my eyes. And this tragedy is the result. There's nothing to be done about it now, but was there really no other way?"

"Perhaps there was, but it was beyond my means to come up with one. As you say, there's nothing to be done about it now. We must make the most of this situation."

Reinhard stared at his chief advisor. It was unclear whether the hatred swelling in his ice-blue eyes was directed at von Oberstein or at himself.



Images of the Westerland tragedy were transmitted over FTL, causing outrage and trembling in every corner of the empire. Popular sentiment swiftly began

breaking away from the old aristocratic regime, and even the nobles began to foment the view that Duke von Braunschweig was done for.

Kircheis, who had conquered the frontier stellar regions, made for Gaiesburg to rendezvous with Reinhard. Seeing those images, he too felt renewed anger toward the exalted nobles. But then, one day midvoyage, Wahlen's fleet captured a shuttle. It carried only a single officer, who said that although he had been forced to participate in the Westerland nuclear strike as a subordinate of Duke von Braunschweig, he had deserted en route. That was well and good, but there was one thing he said that Kircheis couldn't shrug off. Hardly believing his own ears, he questioned him further.

"I'll say this as many times as I have to. Despite being informed that the noble forces were to massacre the two million inhabitants of Westerland, Marquis von Lohengramm let them die, and all for the sake of propaganda."

"That must have been because he didn't believe the intelligence. Is there any proof that the marquis intentionally let the people of Westerland die?"

"Proof?" said the officer with a derisive laugh. Weren't the images they were broadcasting throughout the galaxy proof enough? Were they really recorded by chance, taken from only a short distance above the planet, somewhere in the stratosphere?

Kircheis silently dismissed the defector and put a gag order on his troops. It was unbelievable—something he didn't want to believe. But was it possible this was the truth?

"I'll be meeting with Reinhard very soon. And when I do, I'll confirm the truth for myself."

And if he did, Kircheis asked himself, what then? It was fine if this was a false rumor. But what if it *was* the truth?

There was no clear answer.

Until now, Reinhard and Kircheis had shared one and the same sense of justice. Would the day come when they might diverge, even if one could never exist without the other ... ?

CHAPTER 7

A VICTORY FOR WHOM?

Boris Konev, the young independent trader of Phezzan, couldn't hide his sullen mood. He had braved the dangers of traversing a battlefield to transport the band of Terraist pilgrims, but his earnings had been meager, and once he'd cleared up his debts, paid his subordinates' wages, and docked the *Beryozka*, the amount left after subtracting living expenses was scarcely enough to buy ten square centimeters of spacecraft hull.

"You look like you're in a bad mood," said the deep-voiced man standing before the desk.

Konev, flustered, explained it away.

"No, this is just my normal expression. It has absolutely nothing to do with being in the presence of Your Excellency."

The latter statement was clearly saying too much, and the speaker quite regretted it, but the man to whom it was said—Landesherr Rubinsky—took no visible offense.

"You transported the followers of the Terraist faith to Earth, correct?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of them?"

"I don't know much about them. But as for religion in general, I think it's an awful contradiction for the poverty stricken to believe in a just God, given what's more likely—that God is unjust, and that's why the poverty stricken exist."

"There's some reason in that. You don't believe in God, then?"

"Not in the least."

"Aha."

"Whoever came up with the bill of goods called God was the greatest scam artist in all of history. The creativity of it is admirable, if only in terms of business savvy. In every nation, from ancient times all the way up to our current age, isn't it true that the ones with wealth have always been the aristocracy, the landowners, and the priestly orders?"

Landesherr Rubinsky gazed at the young independent trader with interest. Konev felt a prickly sensation. The landesherr was a virile-looking man in his early forties, but there wasn't a single hair anywhere on his head. It was only natural that being stared at by this unusual man was nothing like, say, being

stared at by a beautiful woman.

"That's quite an interesting viewpoint. Is it your own original one?"

"No ..."

Boris Konev made this denial with a tinge of regret. "I wish it were, but most of it is received wisdom. From my childhood. It must be sixteen, seventeen years ago, already."

"Hmm."

"I grew up traveling star to star with my father, but at one point, I got to know another kid in similar circumstances. The other boy was two years older, but we became friends. We only spent about two or three months together, but he was a kid who knew a lot of things and did a lot of thinking. All those were things he said," Konev explained.

"What was his name?"

"Yang Wen-li."

Konev's expression was that of a magician who has just pulled off a new illusion.

"I hear he's now found work in the little-esteemed field of military service, for which a free man like myself can't help but pity him."

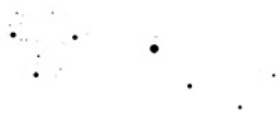
The young captain was somewhat disappointed, for the landesherr did not show much surprise. After a few moments of silence, Rubinsky solemnly opened his mouth.

"Captain Boris Konev, the government of Phezzan has settled on delegating a momentous duty to you."

"Huh?" Konev blinked, more out of caution than surprise. Called the "Black Fox of Phezzan" by both by empire and alliance, this landesherr carried, within his broad, robust physique, calculations and stratagems rolled and folded in upon themselves like a piecrust—so went the ubiquitous rumors. Konev himself could find no grounds whatsoever to negate these rumors. For one thing, this lowly trader didn't even know why he'd been summoned by the landesherr. It hadn't been for the sake of hearing his reminiscing. What sort of duty did he mean to delegate?

When he finally left the governmental offices, Konev rolled both his arms in wide circles, as though he were trying to throw off invisible chains.

A puppy being walked by an older woman began to bark shrilly at him. Konev brandished a fist in the direction of the pup and, to the woman's reproachful cries, made his departure with a rather sullen gait.



When Konev returned to the vessel, a broad smile was spread across the aging face of Officer Marinesk. There'd been a notice, he said, from the Energy Commission, stating that they'd no longer need worry about fuel for *Beryozka*.

"Just exactly what kind of magic did you use, sir? For a small-time trading ship like us, this is nothing short of a miracle."

"I sold myself out to the government."

“Eh?”

“It’s the bloody Black Fox.”

It was Marinesk who, in a panic, cast his gaze all around; the speaker himself made no effort to lower his voice. “He’s hatching some sort of foul plot, no doubt about it. But to drag an upstanding citizen into it ...”

“Just what went on over there, sir? You say you sold yourself out to the government. Have you become a civil servant?”

“A civil servant?!”

On hearing the officer’s unique way of expressing the situation, Konev’s angry expression softened.

“No question—I’m a civil servant. I’ve been made an intelligence operative and have been told to go to the Free Planets.”

“Oh-ho!”

“Let me tell you something about the Konev clan ... We’ve been proud to say that for these last two hundred years, our family has never produced a single criminal or a single politician!” Konev started shouting. “We’ve been free private citizens. Free private citizens, I tell you! And now just look what’s happened—a spy, he says! So now I’m both of those things at once!”

“It’s *intelligence operative*, sir—*intelligence operative*.”

“Changing the words doesn’t fix anything! Does calling cancer a cold turn it into a cold? If I say a lion is a rat, will that spare me from getting my head bitten off?”

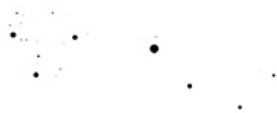
Marinesk didn’t reply, but to himself he thought, *Well, those are some gruesome comparisons.*

“He’d already dredged up the fact that I knew Yang Wen-li in my childhood. This is not amusing. Maybe I’ll just clue Yang in on every last bit of this instead.”

“But that probably won’t be possible, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Not possible, sir. I’m telling you—his making you an intelligence operative isn’t the sum total of all this. Someone’s eyes will be watching you from behind. Someone to watch and to dole out punishment.”



“So let’s hear all the details, please, sir.”

Marinesk had made coffee. It had an unpleasantly strong acidity; it was clear without asking that it was the cheap stuff. Savoring every sip, Marinesk made it last twice as long as Konev did, as he listened to how things stood.

“I see. But if I may say so, Captain, there was no need to go mentioning Yang Wen-li’s name in front of His Excellency the Landesherr. Of course, it’s likely that if you hadn’t brought it up, the other party would have broached the topic in any case.”

“I know. *Loose lips sink ships*. I mean to be more circumspect in the future.”

Disgusted with himself, Konev acknowledged his mistake. Still, this didn’t mean he was justifying or accepting Rubinsky’s directives. Even if they were

invisible, chains were chains, and being unable to make money was nothing compared to the discomfort of being bound by these.

If Boris Konev's existence as a human being had any sort of worth, it lay in his being a free man, independent and unfettered. Rubinsky, landesherr of Phezzan, had heedlessly trampled that source of pride underfoot. What was even worse was that Rubinsky thought of this, perversely, as a favor he was dispensing!

Human beings possessing power apparently thought it a great privilege for a citizen to be peripherally involved with the mechanisms of that power. It appeared that even so formidable a man as Rubinsky couldn't get free of this delusion.

And so ... why not let him believe that delusion for the time being? Konev smiled sardonically.

Marinesk, gazing at his young captain with a thoughtful eye, picked up the kettle.

"How about one more cup of coffee?"

II

In early August, Yang Wen-li, who had arrived at the outskirts of the Baalat Stellar Region, positioned his fleet and watched for an opportunity to advance upon Heinessen. The distance to Heinessen was six light-hours, approximately 6.5 billion kilometers. For a fleet that astrogated interstellar space, this could be called shouting distance.

That Yang had advanced to this range held not only military but also political significance.

It meant the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic, which occupied Heinessen, wielded no political power beyond the planetary level and was unable to exert effective control over even the Baalat Stellar Region. With the defeat of the Eleventh Fleet, they had lost their military capability in interstellar space. For the above reasons, the wholesale defeat of the Military Congress, the failure of the coup, and the restoration of order under the Charter of the Alliance were all just a matter of time. Through his actions, Yang had flaunted these realities to the entire alliance.

The effect was profound. Yang's renown—he himself would call it empty fame—served, of course, to amplify that effect. Those who had until then been undecided as to whether to support the High Council or the coup had one by one made their allegiances clear, flocking to Yang's side from various planetary guard corps, local garrison patrols and retirees, officers and enlisted, and even civilians hoping to participate in the volunteer forces under Yang.

Naturally, the organizing of volunteer forces didn't go smoothly. Yang disliked involving civilians in warfare. He felt that the psychological makeup of civilians who wanted anything to do with war was questionable, but he couldn't deny them their freely chosen intentions. They went so far as to trot out the "Right of Resistance" provision of the Charter of the Alliance—the right of citizens to use force to resist unjust uses of power—to overrule the hesitation of the young commander.

At that point, Yang decided to add age restrictions to the requirements for joining the volunteer corps. He attempted to exclude persons under eighteen or

over fifty-five years of age, but older people who looked not a day under eighty insisted they were fifty-five and, on the other extreme, seventeen-year-old hopefuls who'd seen Julian and could by no means believe he was older than themselves all turned on the officials in charge, forcing a wry laugh out of Lieutenant Frederica Greenhill as she said, "Well, this is not easy."

It did give Yang pleasure when retired marshal Sidney Sitolet, former director of Joint Operational Headquarters, proclaimed his support. He had been headmaster of the Officers' Academy when Yang was a student. On one level, Yang admired him, but he also retained an impression of Sitolet as a tough nut to crack. Yang was thus all the more glad he'd avoided making an enemy of him. Having that happen with Admiral Greenhill was already more than enough trouble.

There were even a lot of people who had previously shown sympathy in word or deed for the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic who came to join. This was in part a result of the Stadium Massacre becoming known; these voices grew conspicuously loud in criticizing the coup d'état faction. The earnest Chief of Staff Murai caustically criticized their defection and opportunistic behavior, but Yang said, "Everybody tries to secure their own physical safety. If I were in a position of less responsibility, even I might have thought about siding with the faction that held the upper hand."

Looking at history, people who lived in ages of upheaval had always done the same. If they didn't, they didn't survive, and whether you called it "the ability to read a situation" or "flexibility," the practice was nothing to condemn. On the contrary, the bill of goods called "unswerving convictions" had more frequently caused harm to others and to societies.

After discarding the republican governmental system in favor of the monarchical Galactic Empire, Rudolf von Goldenbaum, killer of four billion citizens who'd opposed autocratic rule, was second to none in the strength of his convictions. Those in the coup d'état faction that now actually controlled Heinessen were also presumably acting out of conviction.

In human history, there had been no battles of Armageddon between absolute good and absolute evil. What had occurred was strife between one subjective good and another subjective good—conflicts between one side and another, both equally convinced of their rightness. Even in cases of unilateral wars of aggression, the aggressor always believed it was in the right. Thus, humanity was in a constant state of warfare. So long as human beings kept believing in God and justice, there was no chance of strife disappearing.

As for conviction, it made Yang's hair stand on end to hear the words "belief in victory at all costs."

"If one could win by virtue of belief, then nothing could be easier, since everyone *wants* to win," were Yang's thoughts. As he would put it, conviction was no more than a powerful form of wishing; there was no objective basis to the idea that it influenced outcomes. The stronger it grew, the narrower one's perspective became, until it became impossible to accurately discern what was going on. By and large, *conviction* was an embarrassing word, and even if its existence in dictionaries must be accepted, it was not a word that ought to be seriously uttered. When Yang would say so, Julian would respond with amusement, "So, that's Your Excellency's conviction?"

Naturally, no matter how Yang tried to phrase his answer, the boy would have already anticipated the points he was trying to convey.

Even so, the first individual in history to launch a military assault on Planet Heinessen, which had been named for the alliance's founding father, was not of the empire.

"It is, amazingly, Yang Wen-li—myself."

Yang directed a silent laugh at Julian. In his present mood, all he could do was laugh. In his conviction for democratic government, he didn't hesitate to swallow his grief and attack his own homeland—the aesthetic of tragedy surrounding the affair didn't register with him. Making no clumsy attempt to comfort him, Julian replied, "Just don't launch any assault on the Galactic Empire's capital until I've grown enough to stand on my own. It won't be long."

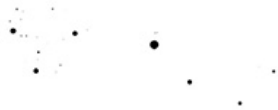
"On Odin? I'll leave that to you. Attacking Heinessen's too much for me already. I want to retire posthaste and start that pensioner's life I've dreamed of."

"Oh, so in that case, I'm allowed to join the military, right?"

Yang, flustered, took back what he'd said. Julian dreamed of being an officer commanding great fleets in space, but Yang hadn't been able to come to a decision yet regarding this. Setting aside the fact that this was about Julian, wasn't the convention itself—the struggle for hegemony via decisive battles between great fleets—a relic of the past? Lately, Yang had begun to believe so.

The crucial thing was securing the necessary space at the necessary time. If a particular area of space could be utilized at a particular time, that was sufficient. It was only because some aimed to secure areas of space in perpetuity that routes became restricted, battle spaces were delineated, and fighting became unavoidable. But shouldn't it be enough to simply use areas without any enemies—during only the intervals when the enemy wasn't present?

Yang had, for the moment, named this tactical concept "space control" and wanted to systematize it as a tactical framework. In flexibility and rationality, it was one step above the current "command of space" thinking that hinged on fleet-versus-fleet battles. He couldn't blame von Schönpkopf if he mocked him for it. Yang, for all that he hated war, could not set aside his enthusiasm for tactics and strategy as an intellectual game.



Around this time, deep beneath the surface of planet Heinessen, one man was reassuring his comrades.

"It's not over yet," Admiral Greenhill said forcefully. "We've still got Artemis's Necklace. As long as it's there, even the great Yang Wen-li can't penetrate Heinessen's gravitational field." Seeing a hint of brightening in the faces of all gathered, he repeated his sentiment: "We aren't defeated yet."

III

We haven't won yet, Yang thought, casting his gaze upon the beautiful jade

planet floating up onto the screen.

He gave no heed to Artemis's Necklace. Whether armament or fortress, he'd never once feared hardware, no matter how formidable. There were any number of means to render Artemis's Necklace powerless. Taking an inhabited planet by military force was intrinsically no easy feat. In and of itself, it was a gigantic supply and production base, and a force attacking it needed huge quantities of munitions. In the initial lead-up to the pitched battle at Amritsar, the alliance forces had been able to take control of numerous inhabited planets, but that had only been a result of the strategic retreat of the imperial forces. The planets had been mere morsels scattered along the path to a trap, and they'd indiscriminately gobbled them up.

The Heinessen situation wouldn't go so smoothly. But Heinessen's weakness was its faith in hardware, namely Artemis's Necklace. If the object of that faith could be shattered, the will to resist could likely be broken in the same instant.

Twelve military satellites, affording a 360-degree omnidirectional offensive capability. Twelve spheres, fully outfitted in mirror-plated armor, equipped with the full gamut of weaponry—including laser cannons, charged-particle-beam cannons, neutron-beam cannons, infrared cannons, laser-triggered thermonuclear missiles, rail cannons, and more—and supplied, by sunlight, with an infinite amount of energy. A mass killing system, as beautiful as it was expensive, spheres glittering with a hint of iridescence over a foundation of silver.

But those satellites would likely be destroyed by the hand of Yang Wen-li, without ever boasting a single moment of distinguished service. What Yang feared for were the billion human beings, military and civilian, on Planet Heinessen. All of them could become valuable hostages for the coup d'état faction. If that faction were to threaten to annihilate Planet Heinessen and all of its inhabitants with it ... Or if they pointed a blaster at Admiral Bucock's head and demanded negotiations ...

Yang Wen-li would have to throw up his hands.

He didn't want to believe Admiral Greenhill would take things that far. But then again, Greenhill's position as one of the coup's masterminds had itself been beyond Yang's imagining.

Against this eventuality, Yang had to take some sort of action. What could be done to deal a blow to their tenacity and to prevent their putting up a futile resistance?

This coup—the intent of its instigators notwithstanding—had been planned by Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm of the Galactic Empire. Yang had to bring that fact out into the daylight.

There was no material evidence. But a large-scale civil war was in fact happening within the empire. Using that as circumstantial evidence ought to be possible. Or maybe material evidence could be discovered after quelling the coup. At any rate, what Yang needed was someone whom he could bring out as a witness.

"There's something I'd like you to do."

"I'm at your service, sir." As he replied, Bagdash glanced around the room and was relieved to see that Julian wasn't there. It was absurd to feel so powerless before that handsome young man, but once someone's gotten the drop on you, the memory has a lasting impact. "And what is it you'd like me to do? I'll go so

far as to infiltrate Heinessen if you so order, sir ...”

“And run straight to Admiral Greenhill’s side?”

“That’s unfair, sir.”

“I’m kidding. Truth is, I want to call you as a witness.”

“A witness? To what?”

“A witness to the fact that the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic’s little coup was orchestrated by none other than Reinhard von Lohengramm of the Galactic Empire.”

Bagdash blinked several times. When he finally processed what Yang was saying, his jaw dropped. He regarded the commander as though he were suddenly looking at a different man.

“You’ve come up with one extraordinary idea, sir.”

A propaganda maneuver to utterly demolish the legitimacy of the coup—this was how Bagdash interpreted it. It could be nothing else.

“It’s a fact. We don’t have any material evidence at the moment. But still, a fact it is.” So Yang said, but the look of surprise and doubt didn’t leave Bagdash’s face. Yang was about to say more but then gave up on trying to convince the man.

“Well, whatever. It’s understandable if you can’t believe it.” He was feeling rather apathetic. It was doubtful whether anyone besides Bagdash would believe what Yang was saying, either. The only ones who’d believe him were probably Bucock, who’d heard this claim from Yang before the coup had actually happened, and Julian. He wondered whether even von Schönkopf and Frederica would. Von Schönkopf might show his unsavory smile and say, “That’s a well-made talking point, but it’s too straightforward. Taking into account your slight overoptimism, I’d score it maybe an 80 percent.”

And Frederica might object: “Please don’t show such disdain for my father, sir. There’s no way he would become a pawn of the empire.”

Yang shook his head once to drive away these faces that were floating up in the back of his mind. “Anyway, I’m going to have you attest to this. If you need a detailed script or material evidence, I’ll create it for you. With my acknowledgment that we’re not playing fair. How about it—can you do it?”

“All right. I’m a turncoat. I’ll do what I can to be of use, sir.” It wasn’t that Yang’s expression or his voice had grown particularly stern. But there was something about the man that made it difficult for Bagdash to resist. For the time being, at least, Bagdash had no choice but to entrust his fate to Yang.

Feeling a hint of self-loathing at having forced Bagdash’s obeisance, Yang called in Lieutenant Frederica Greenhill.

“I want to discuss the technological issues around methods of attacking Artemis’s Necklace. Gather everyone in the conference room.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tension showed in every movement of Frederica’s body, brought on by the nerve-racking challenge of destroying those dozen military satellites, renowned for the unparalleled power they boasted. Just what the cost might be was beyond imagining. But, as though he’d intuited her thoughts, Yang spoke.

“Not to worry, Lieutenant Greenhill. I promise we won’t sacrifice a single battleship or a single human life in order to take out Artemis’s Necklace.”

Not that Yang believed that a bloodless victory would earn him an indulgence

for what he was about to do ...

Commander Bagdash's appearance on the communicator screen was, for the beleaguered members of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic, an extremely unpleasant surprise. Having failed in his vital task of assassinating Yang Wen-li, he had left his erstwhile allies in a perilous position, and now, with his absurd claim that the coup had been brought about through Reinhard von Lohengramm's machinations, he had wholly undercut the righteousness of their cause.

"That shameless backstabber! It's incredible that Bagdash can even show his face in public." The enraged voice was tinged with gloom. The members of the Military Congress knew they had no way to exact revenge on the traitor. They also had to acknowledge that even Artemis's Necklace could do nothing more than push back the date of their final, eventual defeat.

The Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic now controlled only the surface of Planet Heinessen and a portion of its subsurface areas. Three-dimensional space was now entirely in the hands of their adversary.

That adversary—that mere child of a commander named Yang Wen-li—had rendered the coup a failure. He had vanquished the Eleventh Fleet, robbing the Military Congress of the only interstellar military capability it had, confined the coup's impact to the singular planet of Heinessen, and drawn people who'd been on the fence into his own camp. His adept actions had been a wonder to behold. But there was one complaint Greenhill had to make regarding Yang's character.

"I may have misjudged Yang Wen-li. That he'd employ such blatant propaganda, calling us pawns of the empire—there was no need to show us that degree of contempt."

The entire group nodded vigorously. Seeing this, Greenhill continued. "We started this ourselves. It was facilitated by Rear Admiral Lynch's returning from the empire and giving us such a marvelous strategic plan. Marquis von Lohengramm had nothing to do with it. That's so, isn't it, Lynch?"

Lynch's eyes, glazed over with drunkenness, burned red. From the face he made, it looked as though he had been seized by some sort of powerful urge. "I'm honored by your praise, but it wasn't me who came up with that strategy."

"What?!" An ominous look of doubt spread obliquely across Admiral Greenhill's face. After a few seconds' hesitation, he asked, "Then who? Who came up with such an accomplished plan?"

A considerable moment of silence passed between this question and its response.

"Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm, imperial marshal of the Galactic Empire."

"W-what did you say?!"

"Yang Wen-li is right. This coup was the brainchild of the Marquis von Lohengramm, the golden brat himself. He wanted to cause infighting within the

alliance while he was settling things with the aristocracy in the empire's civil war. You've all been manipulated."

"You're saying you've had us dancing in the palm of von Lohengramm's hand all along?" The voice of the asker was hoarse and cracking.

"That's right," Lynch jeered, his voice full of venom. "And you all put on a great performance for us. Idiots like Captain Christian did too, of course, but so did you, Admiral Greenhill."

Borne aloft on breath that reeked of alcohol, an invisible imp leapt about the room, pricking hearts with his spear as he went. Somebody let out a groan.

"Have a look at this. This is the strategic plan Marquis von Lohengramm gave me." A small, slim file folder flew from Lynch's hand and made a dry slap as it landed on the desk. Greenhill snatched it up and flipped through the pages.

"But, Arthur, why did you get on board with von Lohengramm's schemes? What did he offer you that was so tempting? Did he promise to make you a full admiral in the Imperial Navy?"

"There was that, too ..." Lynch's tone quavered as he spoke; it kept rising and falling abruptly. The man himself made no visible effort to rein it in. "But that's not all. I'm not gonna name names, but let's just say I wanted to heap humiliation on certain people who are sure that they're always in the right and never doubt it. The kind of humiliation that can never be explained away. As for what would become of my career track, or even my life, I just didn't care anymore."

Lynch's red eyes drank in the gleam of all the others' horrified expressions. "So how about it, Admiral Greenhill? How does it feel to know that this glorious bill of goods called the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic was nothing but a tool for an ambitious schemer in the empire?"

His words trailed off, becoming a laugh. That grotesque, arrhythmic laughter ate away like acid at everyone's spirits. This man, who'd dragged his own name through the mud when he fled El Facil, who'd spent nine years in inexcusable alcoholic dissolution—had he nursed this grudge, with nobody to direct it at, that entire time?

"Mister Chairman! The enemy's attack has begun," the comm officer called out in a stiff voice. This thawed the frozen gathering. Greenhill turned around and let out a voice like someone waking from a nightmare.

"Which of the twelve satellites are they attacking?"

The note of perplexity in the response was clear. "... They're attacking all twelve at once, sir."

The assembled group all exchanged glances. There was more bewilderment than surprise in their faces. The twelve satellites, moving freely in orbit, had the ability to defend and support one another. For this reason, it made sense to attack multiple satellites simultaneously, though that did run the risk of dissipating force projection. But all twelve at once? That defied all common sense. What was Yang Wen-li thinking?

The screen came on, displaying objects moving on straight paths through space toward the satellites. When the nature of those objects became clear, a buzz spread through the room.

"Ice ..."

Admiral Greenhill groaned. They were enormous—huge blocks of ice far larger than any battleship.

IV

Three hundred years ago. The Galactic Empire.

On Altair's frigid seventh planet, there was a young man, a believer in representative government, who'd been forced into a mining job under conditions equivalent to slavery. His name was Ahle Heinessen.

He longed to escape the planet and build a new state among faraway stars for like-minded believers. The only thing standing in his way was a lack of materials to construct a starship and carry the people there.

One day, Heinessen saw a child playing with a toy ship, carved from ice, that the kid had made. The young man was struck as though with a revelation.

He built a spacecraft from the inexhaustible supply of naturally occurring dry ice on Altair's seventh planet and then embarked on a long, long voyage extending across fifty years of time and ten thousand light-years of space.

That was the shining legend of Ahle Heinessen, father of the Free Planets Alliance.

"I learned this tactic from the tale of our founding father, Heinessen." Yang said this not out of pride but as a bit of wry humor.

The plan was as follows:

Srinagar, the Baalat system's sixth planet, was a frigid world of ice. From its surface, a dozen cylindrical blocks of ice would be carved. Each block would have a volume of one cubic kilometer and a mass of a billion tons.

These carved cylinders of ice would then be transported into zero-gravity space, where the temperature approached 273.15 degrees Celsius—absolute zero.

At this point, the central cores would be bored through by laser, and Bussard ramjet engines would be installed.

These engines would project a gigantic, basket-shaped magnetic field in front of the cylinder to capture ionized, charged interstellar matter. As that matter drew near to the ice cylinder, it would be compressed and heated, and in an extremely short span of time, it would achieve the conditions for nuclear fusion to occur within the engine. When it was ejected from the rear of the cylinder, the exhaust would be at an energy level much greater than when it had entered through the front.

During this time, the uncrewed ice craft would continually, ceaselessly accelerate, and the closer they approached to the speed of light, the more efficiently they would draw in interplanetary matter. In this manner, the ice ships would attain near-luminal velocities.

Now, at this point, let us recall a basic fact of the theory of relativity: as matter approaches the speed of light, its effective mass increases.

For instance, the mass of a ship flying at 99.9 percent of the speed of light increases to approximately 22 times its original mass. At 99.99 percent of light speed, it reaches 70 times its original value, and at 99.999 percent, it becomes 223 times greater.

A one billion-ton chunk of ice, its mass increased by 223 times, achieves a mass of 223 billion tons. What would happen if an ice chunk with the same mass as three million sixty-story buildings combined collided with something at near light speed? The military satellites that comprised Artemis's Necklace would be

pulverized, with nary a fragment remaining.

However, to keep these chunks of ice from colliding with Planet Heinessen proper, their vectors of motion had to be set with extreme care. As all twelve satellites and all twelve ice blocks were uncrewed, though, not a single drop of blood would be shed.

“Any questions?”

Von Schönkopf applauded gently in response.

“You don’t mind us destroying all twelve?” he asked—sardonically suggesting that it might be best to leave a handful for future use.

“I don’t mind a bit. Let’s crush ’em all.” Yang brushed the issue away without hesitation. Artemis’s Necklace, Yang believed, constituted one of the reasons people had fooled themselves into thinking this coup would succeed.

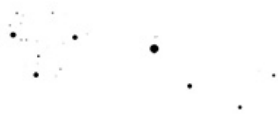
This Necklace symbolized a shameful way of thinking: that Heinessen could survive alone, even if all the other star systems and all the other planets were subjected to enemy control. But if an enemy assault ever got this far, it would mean the alliance was just one step away from total defeat. Best to never let an enemy invasion advance so far—and the first consideration for that ought to be political and diplomatic efforts to avoid war from the outset.

The reliance on military hardware to maintain peace was nothing more than a product of the nightmares of hardened militarists. That kind of thinking was on the level of some solivision action program for small children. *One day, hideous and warlike aliens, without reason or cause, suddenly invaded from the far reaches of the universe, so the peace-loving, justice-loving humans had no choice but to fight back.* And for that purpose, mighty weapons and huge installations were required—so went the argument.

Every time he’d see that swarm of satellites encompassing this beautiful planet, Yang would fall into a foul mood, associating it with a snake constricting around a goddess’s throat.

In short, Yang had disliked the cheap costume jewelry that was Artemis’s Necklace for a long time, and he meant to take this opportunity to smash it to bits, with the added bonus of delivering shock therapy to the cult of hardware. He had thought up a number of ways to render Artemis’s Necklace impotent. But for these reasons, Yang had chosen the most spectacular method of them all.

The plan was set into motion.



The twelve gigantic blocks of ice sped toward the twelve military satellites.

It was a sight that beggared the imagination. As their speed increased, the frozen cylinders gained in mass, becoming ever more powerful weapons. The radar and sensor reconnaissance systems with which the satellites were furnished latched on to the rapidly closing ice blocks. They were neither energy waves nor metallic objects, but rather compounds of hydrogen and oxygen—in and of themselves, harmless. Even so, their mass and speed were regarded as threat factors, and the satellites’ computers took action.

A laser cannon locked its sights on an ice block and shot out a column of superheated energy. A perfectly circular hole three meters in diameter opened in the wall of ice. Not even a high-output laser cannon could pierce all the way through the ice, however. The laser's characteristically strict unidirectionality impeded the spread of destructive effect, leading, conversely, to negative results. But that wasn't all: a portion of the ice also vaporized, generating a large quantity of steam, which robbed the laser of heat energy. What's more, in an absolute-zero vacuum, the steam refroze immediately as soon as it formed, transforming into a cloud of ice crystals that, in accordance with the law of inertia, continued to speed ahead at nigh-luminal velocities. Though missiles were fired and the flashes of their detonations lit up the surface of the icy mass, they, too, had no visible effect, having been shredded by passage through the crystals before striking the central mass.

On the bridge of Yang's flagship *Hyperion*, the crew voicelessly watched this spectacle, and the communications officer's head swam with the rapidly changing numbers displayed by the mass reader. The nearer the ice missiles approached the speed of light, the greater their mass swelled.

They collided.

The ice shattered. So did the satellites. Shards of ice danced in the void, reflecting sunlight and planetary light, casting a dazzling brilliance throughout the surrounding space. Each and every ice shard had hundreds of tons of mass. But as they glittered beautifully on the screen, one could believe they were lighter than snowflakes. The broken fragments of satellite were already indistinguishable.

V

"Annihilated ... Artemis's Necklace ... has not a single satellite remaining ... It's been annihilated ..."

In a state of distraction, the communications officer kept repeating the word "annihilated." The members of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic stood stock-still, as though transformed into pillars of salt.

They were starting to believe that word alone would echo in their ears forever when there came another sound—like a heavy object hitting the ground. Greenhill had collapsed into his chair. Amid the concentrated gazes of his comrades, he forced out in a hoarse voice:

"It's all over. Our military revolution has failed. We've lost. Let's admit it."

After a few seconds' interval, a cry of opposition arose. Captain Evens raised his voice and tried to encourage his co-conspirators.

"No, it is not over," the captain insisted. "We have hostages. All of Heinessen's one billion citizens are still in our hands." He slammed his open palm onto the table. "On top of that, we've captured the director of Joint Operational Headquarters and the commander in chief of the space armada. Depending on the conditions, there's a chance we can still negotiate. It's still too soon to give up."

"We have to quit. Any resistance beyond this will not only be futile, it will harm the reconciliation process between the government and the citizens. It's already over. Let's at least face the closing curtain gracefully."

The captain's shoulders fell, and a feeble voice leaked out from between his

color-drained lips. "Then what are we going to do now? Surrender and be put on trial?"

"Those who wish to do so are welcome to. I'll choose a different route, but there's something I have to do beforehand. We cannot leave evidence or witnesses attesting that our noble uprising was orchestrated by an ambitious puppet master from the empire."

Greenhill's eyes stared loathingly at Lynch. "Rear Admiral Lynch, I had high expectations for you from the beginning of your career—ever since you were two classes behind me at Officers' Academy. It was regrettable when that incident at El Facil happened nine years ago. That's why I took you under my wing in this, thinking we could restore your reputation, but ..."

"You're just no judge of character," the drunken ex-rear admiral pointed out coldly.

Admiral Greenhill's face changed color. Rage, despair, defeat, abhorrence—all these emotions fused together, harmonizing; one might think something had exploded within him.

Two flashes of light shot through the room. One was swallowed up into the space between Greenhill's eyebrows; the other grazed Lynch's left ear, slicing off a portion of skin and meat. Hard upon his cry, multiple light bursts from in front, from behind, from the left and the right drilled narrow, burning tunnels into Lynch's body. A few seconds behind Greenhill, he too collapsed to the floor.

"You fools ..."

Rear Admiral Lynch spat out his last laugh with bubbles of blood and looked around at the officers who had shot him.

"I just saved Greenhill's honor, don't you think? Rather than living ... being brought to trial, it was probably better ... for the bastard to die ... Heh. Honor ... so stupid."

A bubble of blood burst, and a film began to form over both his open eyes. Walking over and spitting onto Lynch's face, Captain Evens shouted: "Burn this disgusting file to cinders. Dispose of Lynch's corpse. Get rid of everything that could potentially compromise the justice of our cause."

"Admiral Yang's fleet has deployed into orbit," the comm officer said in a shrill voice. "They're about to begin landing operations. What shall we do?"

Evens knitted his brow but presently nodded as though he'd reached a decision.

"Open a channel. I'll speak with Admiral Yang."

Soon, the form of the young admiral appeared on-screen, wearing his black military beret at a bit of a slant. His staff was standing by behind him, and among them was the face of Admiral Greenhill's daughter. Evens winced slightly.

"I am Alliance Navy captain Evens. As acting chair of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic, I request permission to speak. There's no need for an assault. We know we're defeated and have reached a decision to forgo any futile resistance. Everything's finished."

"That's well and good, but ..." Naturally, Yang held some misgivings. "What happened to the chairman of your Military Congress, Admiral Greenhill? I don't see him there."

After the span of a breath, Evens responded. "His Excellency took his own life. It was a splendid end."

Hearing this, Frederica Greenhill let out a low wail and covered her mouth

with one hand. Her shoulders quivered.

“Admiral Yang, our aims have been to clean up the government of our democratic republic and to expunge from the universe the despotism of the Galactic Empire. It is regrettable that we were unable to realize these ideals. Admiral Yang, the end result of all this is that you’ve lent your strength to the continued existence of despotism.”

“What is despotism? Isn’t it when governing officials not chosen by the citizenry rob the people of their freedom and try to control them through force and violence? That is, in sum, exactly the thing that you all have done here on Heinessen.”

Silence.

“It’s you, noble soldiers, who are despots. Am I mistaken?” Yang’s voice was gentle, but there was no forgiveness in the words he spoke.

“You’re wrong!”

“Where am I wrong?”

“What we wanted wasn’t power for ourselves. This was a temporary expedient. It was a provisional form of government that was to be in place only until our homeland was rescued from its corrupted mob rule and the empire overthrown.”

“A temporary expedient ...” Yang murmured with a slight bitterness. For the sake of self-justification, any excuse could be used. Nevertheless, even if this were a temporary expedient, just how many sacrifices would they have demanded?

“If I may ask, we’ve been fighting the empire a long time—150 years—and haven’t managed to overthrow it. We may burn through another 150 years after this and still not be able to overthrow it. After that’s happened, and your group has clung to your positions of power all that time—and all that time has continued to deprive the citizens of their freedoms—will you insist even then that this is a temporary expedient?”

Captain Evens faltered in his reply. But then he changed direction and attempted a rebuttal. “Everyone knows how corrupt the government is now. In order to correct that, what other methods were available?”

“Corrupted government doesn’t come down to politicians taking bribes. That’s no more than individual corruption. What I’d call corrupted government is a state of affairs where even if a politician does take a bribe, he is above criticism for doing so. Your group proclaimed the regulation of free speech. Don’t you think by that alone you’ve lost the grounds to censure the empire’s despots and the alliance’s current government?”

“We were putting our lives and our reputations at stake ...” Captain Evens’s voice veered toward rigidity. “On this point, I won’t allow anyone to slander us. Our cause was not lacking in righteousness. We were merely a little short on luck and the ability to implement our plan. That was all.”

“Captain Evens ...”

“Long live the military revolution!”

The communications screen went gray.

Chief of Staff Murai let out a sigh. “He never admitted his error, up to the last.”

“To each his own sense of righteousness,” Yang replied glumly and told von Schönkopf to ready them for landing. Thus did the Yang Fleet carry out its bloodless landing on the surface of Heinessen.

In light of his station and circumstances, Yang's lack of ceremony bordered on the preposterous. He moved around briskly by himself, causing his subordinates to worry about his security—all the more since it was difficult to judge where the remaining partisans of the coup faction might now be lurking.

Disregarding Chief of Staff Murai's vociferous urgings for caution, Yang proceeded on his own two feet to Joint Operational Headquarters and wrangled the location of Admiral Bucock's confinement out of the surrendered petty officers. In short order, Yang had him freed and sent to a hospital.

The elderly admiral had weakened physically during his four months of imprisonment, and yet the strong light in his eyes and the clarity of his speech set Yang's mind at ease.

"I'm utterly embarrassed," said Bucock. "I was no use to you at all—not even with the information you gave me."

"Not at all. I'm the one who made things miserable for you by taking so long. Is there anything you need?"

"Well, for the present, I sure would love a nip of whiskey."

"I'll have a bottle brought right away."

"What happened to Admiral Greenhill?"

"He's dead."

"Is he? Huh. So this old man's outlived yet another one."

Yang was grateful that Admiral Greenhill had had the sense of decency not to take any hostages—senior officials or citizens—down with him. He felt less so, however, when he released Dawson, the acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters.

A mountain of matters that needed sorting out after the incident loomed before Yang.

He'd need to inform the entire alliance of the coup's failure and the reinstatement of the Charter of the Alliance, assess the damage, arrest the surviving members of the Military Congress for the Rescue of the Republic, and have autopsy reports made for the dead, including Admiral Greenhill and Captain Evens. When he thought about it, there was any number of other things too. Yang's head ached.

It was at a time like this, though, that Yang's eyes were opened to the true competence of his aide, Frederica Greenhill. Right after learning of her father's death, she had said to Yang, "Can you give me one—no, two hours, sir? I know I can recover from this, but right now, I just can't. So ..."

Yang had nodded. When he'd been informed that Jessica Edwards had been among those massacred, he'd also been forced to gauge the amount of time it would take him to recover.

Yang didn't believe her father had committed suicide. There was no way he had put the muzzle of the gun between his eyes and pulled the trigger. Likely he'd been shot dead by someone else. However, this was a thought that didn't need to be uttered aloud.

As Frederica had been about to take her leave, the young admiral had said, "Uh, Lieutenant, just, how can I put this ... don't get discouraged."

He was capable of making a vast force of a million, of ten million, move just as he commanded it to in an interstellar battlespace. But there were times when he couldn't even control his own tongue properly.

Once two hours had passed, Frederica, having emerged from her room, set about her work with the grace of a swift-flowing river. A mountain of files signed off as "completed" began to form in front of Yang. As he was scanning through the pages, impressed, he saw that her adroitness went as far as selecting the course of the victory parade and even setting the time for it. Maybe this arduous work was, at the moment, her salvation.

Word came in from von Schönkopf, who'd gone out to patrol the city. He said Julian had found the one most responsible for this incident. To Yang, who wondered aloud who this was, he said, "You probably don't even want to hear his name, but it's the High Council chairman, sir."

It was indeed a name Yang loathed hearing.

The word was that Job Trünicht, reported missing since before the coup had occurred, had surfaced. Julian, who'd accompanied Admiral Bucock to the hospital, had been on his way back to Yang when his landcar was called to halt near an old building.

"Y-you're ..." Seeing who addressed him, the youth stammered. The individual his guardian loathed more than any other in the world was standing there, smiling at him.

"Of course you recognize me," Job Trünicht, High Council chairman of the Free Planets Alliance, said in a mild voice. "I'm your head of state."

Julian felt a chill run up his spine. The boy's feelings had been heavily influenced by Yang.

"You're Julian, aren't you? The ward of Admiral Yang. I've heard you're a young man with a promising future."

Julian was silent and bowed his head merely out of politeness. He felt more wary than surprised to learn his existence was known to the man.

Behind Trünicht were gathered five people, male and female. Their expressions were mirthless.

"These fine people are members of the Church of Terra who've sheltered me. I've been holed up in their underground church, making every effort to overthrow those tyrannical militarists all the long while."

Efforts? What efforts have you been making? Haven't you just been hiding in a safe place all along? Aren't you just crawling out into the open now that everything is already over? So Julian wanted to say, but he thought of Yang's position and kept silent.

"Well then, take me to my official residence. I've got an entire citizenry to cheer up with the good news that I'm unharmed."

Left with no choice, Julian had let the chairman into the landcar. After a short

drive, he had thrust Trünicht upon von Schönkopf and his subordinates, who were stationed in front of the official residence.

“Well, well. One disaster ends and another takes its place,” Yang said with a shrug, but something inside wouldn’t quite allow him to laugh. Word was Trünicht had been saved, and sheltered for a long time, by some Terraist faithful. Did this mean that the Church of Terra was being used by Trünicht, too, just as the Patriotic Knights had been?

Or could it be the other way around?

CHAPTER 8

THE GOLDEN BOUGH FALLS

If one sacred guiding principle could be said to reside in every heart, then for Siegfried Kircheis's heart, the principle surely embodied in it took the form of the words a beautiful young girl had spoken eleven years ago:

"Sieg, please be a good friend to my brother."

The redheaded boy had felt so proud to have Annerose, fifteen at the time, speak to him like that. Kircheis had almost never had trouble getting to sleep at night, but just that once, he had tossed and turned late for hours and, somewhere in the darkness, had made a private vow to become a loyal knight to those siblings.

Reinhard, with his golden curls and ivory complexion, had been a beautiful boy—like an angel whose wings were hidden. If he had only been nicer to people, he would have certainly been popular with the children his own age. Ill-suited to his looks, however, was the insolent, aggressive attitude he carried around, and in no time at all, Reinhard had managed to make a large number of enemies. Before long, it was never certain he could even walk down the street unless Kircheis, who had influence and popularity among the boys in the city, walked by his side.

There was one boy, a year older than Reinhard and Kircheis, who was taller and stronger than the other kids in the neighborhood. Only Kircheis—a natural brawler—could outfight him one-on-one, and one day when Kircheis was not around, that boy caught Reinhard in the park and endeavored to teach him a lesson. Maybe he was trying to break the handsome boy's spirit and make him his stooge.

As the boy unleashed a cascade of threats and epithets, Reinhard stared at his face with eyes like frozen gemstones—and suddenly delivered a kick to the boy's crotch. As the boy fell forward, Reinhard grabbed a rock and struck him with it mercilessly. Even when his opponent was covered in blood, screaming for help, and no longer even thinking about fighting, Reinhard didn't stop. Another boy ran and told Kircheis what was happening; Kircheis came running right away and finally pulled Reinhard off of the bully.

Reinhard didn't suffer a single scratch. He acted as if nothing at all had happened and showed not a trace of remorse. It was only when Kircheis pointed out the blood on his clothes that Reinhard suddenly lost his composure. He would

get in trouble if Annerose found out. Although his sister wasn't the type to scold her brother harshly, she would look at him with such a sense of disappointment at times like this. Nothing else worked on Reinhard the way that look did.

The two boys held an impromptu strategy session, and, after talking it over, leapt into the park's fountain with their clothes still on. That would rinse the blood from Reinhard's clothing—it would be much easier to tell Annerose they had fallen in the fountain than to try to explain that terrible fight.

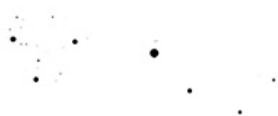
When Kircheis thought about it, he realized there had been no need at all to get soaking wet himself. Yet even so, it felt so comfortable that evening—wrapped up with Reinhard in the same blanket, drinking hot chocolate that Annerose had made for them, listening to the von Müsels' secondhand laundrobot loudly asserting its right to exist in the background.

What worried Kircheis was what would happen if the victim told his parents about what Reinhard had done to him. Nothing ever came of it, though. The boy in question was always finding ways to show off how strong he was, and evidently his pride wouldn't allow him to get his parents involved. That didn't mean he wouldn't try to take revenge, though, so from that point forward, Kircheis hardly left Reinhard's side. If the boy brought his lackeys, they would be more than Reinhard could handle alone. In the end, however, even that worry proved to have been baseless. Although Reinhard alone might make a tempting target, none of those ruffians were so foolish as to make Kircheis their enemy as well.

Not long after, Annerose was taken away to the inner court of Emperor Friedrich IV. Reinhard entered military school, then later came back to bring Kircheis along. That had been the end of the old days.

Since that time, Reinhard had run straight up the staircase of ambition, dragging his redheaded friend along just one step behind.

Kircheis had reciprocated. Those golden-haired siblings were his home, his very life. In that, he felt the joy of deep satisfaction. After all, who else was there who could have followed in Reinhard's footsteps when he was all but leaping across the sky?



"Excellent work, Kircheis," Reinhard said, greeting him with an incandescent smile upon his return from the frontier.

Commanding a powerful secondary force, Kircheis had been fighting isolated battles all over the empire, executing his mission so flawlessly that Reinhard himself almost seemed to have been in two places at once. Marquis von Littenheim, second in command of the aristocrats' confederated military, was now nothing but space dust, and Kircheis had incorporated those brigand forces that had been willing to surrender into his own fleet. Once he had put down the last of the frontier rebellions, he had made for Gaiesburg Fortress to rendezvous with Reinhard's main fleet.

"Admiral Kircheis's accomplishments are simply too marvelous."

In Reinhard's command center, such whispers had lately become commonplace. They were words of praise—but at the same time words of envy, and even of caution.

One important reason Reinhard had been able to focus on fighting Duke von Braunschweig's main fleet was that Kircheis had conquered and stabilized all the surrounding regions. That fact was acknowledged by all, and Reinhard himself was even saying so to others. After all, Reinhard knew that no matter how great Kircheis's accomplishments might be, they were all made on his behalf.

"You must be exhausted. Come, sit down. I have wine and coffee—what will it be? I wish I had some of Annerose's *apfeltorte* to offer, but we can't be picky on the front lines. Consider it something to look forward to when we return."

"Lord Reinhard, there's something I need to talk to you about."

Though Kircheis appreciated Reinhard's warm welcome, he couldn't wait another moment to have a report confirmed or denied.

"What is it?"

"It's about the twenty million people who were slaughtered on Westerland."

"What about them?"

For just an instant, a shade of irritation flitted across Reinhard's handsome face. Kircheis didn't miss it. He felt something cold dripping on his heart.

"Lord Reinhard, I've received a report from someone who claims you knew about the plan to attack Westerland and, for reasons of political expediency, allowed it to happen."

Reinhard said nothing.

"Is that true?"

"... It is." Annerose and Kircheis were the only two people that Reinhard had never been able to lie to.

Kircheis's gaze grew deadly serious—angry, even—and it was plain to see he wasn't going to let go of this. He breathed out a sigh that put his whole body in motion.

"Lord Reinhard, under the empire as it is today ... under the Goldenbaum Dynasty ... it is impossible for true justice to exist. That was why I believed it would mean something if you supplanted it."

"I don't need to hear this from you."

Reinhard knew he was at a disadvantage. Maybe he shouldn't have this discussion with Kircheis. Facing Kircheis alone, he would slip back into boyhood days—back to days when they were equals. Usually, that was what Reinhard wanted—it was second nature to him. Yet now, it was a vertical relationship he craved—one where he could simply dismiss a subordinate by barking out an order. It was, of course, shame over the Westerland massacre that was making him want that.

"The boyar nobility is going to be destroyed. That's a historical inevitability—the settling of a five hundred-year debt—so I understand that bloodshed is unavoidable. But you must not sacrifice the people. Your new system is to be built on the foundation of a freed people. If you sacrifice them for political ends, you're undermining the very ground you'll have to stand on."

"I know that!"

Reinhard drained his wineglass in a single swallow and scowled at his red-haired friend.

“Lord Reinhard.”

Kircheis’s voice carried a slight ring of anger and a great peal of sadness.

“The power struggle that’s playing out between you and the highborn is one fought on equal footing. You can use any tactic you like and feel no regrets. But when you sacrifice the people, it stains your hands with blood that no amount of flowery words or rhetoric can wash away. Why would someone of your stature lower himself to that, for just a temporary benefit?”

The face of the golden-haired youth had turned a sickly pale by this point. Kircheis was right; he was wrong, and facing defeat. That realization, absurdly, gave birth to all the more intense resistance. He glared at his red-haired friend with eyes like those of some rebellious child.

“Enough of your sermonizing!” Reinhard shouted. He felt shame at that moment, and trying to wipe it away made him all the more furious. “In the first place, Kircheis, when did I request your opinion?”

Kircheis said nothing.

“I’m asking you: when did I request your opinion?”

“You did not.”

“That’s right. You may share your opinions when I ask for them. What’s done is done. Don’t speak of it again.”

“Lord Reinhard, the nobles have done something they never should have done, but you ... you’ve failed to do something you should have. I wonder whose sin is greater.”

“Kircheis!”

“Yes?”

“*What are you to me?*” The pale face and ferocious glare bespoke Reinhard’s fury. Kircheis had struck right where it hurt the most. To keep Kircheis from realizing it, Reinhard had to make a show of even greater anger.

Since it had come to that, Kircheis, too, had no choice but to push back. “I am Your Excellency’s loyal underling, Marquis von Lohengramm.”

With that question, and with that answer, both men felt something invisible, something precious, cracking without a sound.

“Good. So you do understand,” Reinhard said, pretending not to notice. “There are rooms prepared for you. Go and rest there until I have orders for you.”

Kircheis bowed silently and left the room.

The truth was that Reinhard did know what he should do. He should go to Kircheis and apologize for what he had done. He should say, “It was only this once. I’ll never do anything like this again.” There was no need to say that with others looking on; just the two of them would be fine. That alone would melt away all the ill feelings. That alone ...

But that was the one thing Reinhard simply could not do.

Reinhard was also thinking that Kircheis should understand how he felt. Unconsciously, he was depending on Kircheis’s support.

How many times had the two of them quarreled as boys? Reinhard had always been the cause; Kircheis had always been the one to smile and forgive him.

But would things go that way this time as well? Unusually for him, Reinhard was not feeling confident.

Gaiesburg Fortress, that man-made island in the heavens, was isolated and under siege.

The people inside could hardly believe what was happening. Had not several thousand nobles come here with their military forces just half a year ago? Had the air not buzzed with energy and activity as though the imperial capital itself had been relocated here? At present, the ongoing cascade of citizens' uprisings, troop desertions, and military defeats was about to turn it into a gargantuan necropolis for aristocrats.

"Why did this happen?" the aristocrats asked one another, dumbstruck. "What happens now? What does Duke von Braunschweig think?"

"He hasn't said a word. It's not clear he thinks anything at all."

Von Braunschweig had suffered a severe loss of authority and the confidence placed in him by others. Numerous faults that had previously either gone unnoticed or been considered petty enough to ignore were now amplified in people's minds. Bad decision making, poor insight, lack of leadership ability. Any one of these was more than enough to warrant criticism.

Of course, those who berated von Braunschweig too much were simultaneously berating themselves by extension, since it was they who had made him their leader and they who had jumped into a civil war under his direction. Ultimately, the aristocrats had to stop blaming their leader, curse themselves for the decisions they had made, and from their dwindling set of options select the smallest disaster they could.

Death in battle. Suicide. Flight. Surrender.

Out of these four, which should they choose?

Those who decided on either of the first two had the least to worry about. They were all preparing in their individual ways for courageous but futile deaths. It was those who had decided to choose life who were launching out into great seas of doubt.

"Even if we announce our surrender," someone said, "will the golden brat—will Marquis von Lohengramm—accept it? We're in completely uncharted waters now."

"You're right," said another. "It's doubtful he will if we go to him empty-handed. But if we bring him a gift ..."

"A gift?"

"I mean von Braunschweig's head."

The speakers fell silent, and their eyes darted all around. Their guilty consciences naturally had them half-expecting to find guards listening nearby.

Already, the suicides were beginning. The first were the elderly aristocrats and those who had already lost their sons in this civil war. Some of them simply gave up on everything and drank poison, while others did as the ancient Romans and slit their wrists while spewing hatred and epithets against Reinhard.

With each new suicide, the survivors' feeling of being in free fall intensified.

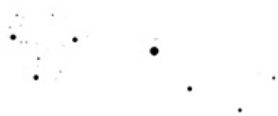
Duke von Braunschweig was drowning in liquor. Though he had no way of knowing it, this was remarkably similar to how Marquis von Littenheim had spent his final day. Duke von Braunschweig had stirred up his fighting spirit, however, shouting that he would kill "that upstart golden brat and make a goblet

from his skull.” Sensible people frowned worriedly and grew all the more pessimistic about where this all was headed.

It was the young aristocrats, Baron Flegel chief among them, who had still not given up on fighting their way out of this. In particular, one segment of this group remained outrageously optimistic.

“All we need to do is fight one battle and take the golden brat’s head,” Flegel argued. “Do that, and we change history—and at the same time make amends for all our past defeats. We have to take the battle to them one last time. There’s no other way.”

With these words, Baron Flegel persuaded Duke von Braunschweig over drinks, then set about having their remaining vessels repaired and readied for a decisive charge that would breathe new life into the aristocracy.



When Reinhard saw the first of the secured messages delivered to him on his flagship, the young imperial marshal smiled just a little.

“Oh? A letter from Fräulein von Mariendorf?”

Hilda—Hildegard von Mariendorf. Reinhard recalled with pleasure the sparkle of her eyes, rich with intellect and life. After placing the chip in the player, he was addressed by the crisp, clear image of Count von Mariendorf’s daughter.

Hilda’s letter, or most of it anyway, concerned the activity or lack thereof of various pro-Reinhard nobles and bureaucrats on Odin. It was not unlike a report document in that regard. What caught Reinhard’s attention, however, was the part where she spoke of Duke Lichtenlade, the acting imperial prime minister.

“His Excellency is conducting a review of the government as a whole right now. At the same time, he’s been very busy running back and forth between aristocrats in the capital. It would appear he has some grand scheme in mind.”

There was a hint of sarcasm to Hilda’s words—to the tilt of her smile—and there was also something deadly serious there as well. She was sending Reinhard a warning.

“That old fox,” Reinhard muttered. “It sounds like he’s getting ready to stab me in the back.”

Reinhard smiled coldly as the face of that seventy-six-year-old elder statesman appeared in the back of his mind: the harsh gaze, the sharply pointed nose, the hair like new-fallen snow. Reinhard had readied plans of his own for the scheming minister, though now those might need to be accelerated. The old man had both the emperor and the imperial seal under his thumb. A scrap of paper was all he would need to legally rob Reinhard of his position.

Reinhard shuffled through the rest of his letters, ignoring the second through the sixth and at last selecting the seventh. It was from his sister Annerose.

After asking about his health and offering words of concern and admonition, Annerose ended her letter in this way:

“Please don’t ever forget what’s most important for you. Sometimes you might think it’s a bother, but it’s much better to recognize and appreciate something

while you still have it than live with regrets when it's gone. Talk everything over with Sieg, and listen to what he tells you. Anyway, that's all for now. I'm looking forward to your coming home. *Auf wiedersehen.*"

Lost in thought, Reinhard touched his finely shaped chin with supple fingers. He played the chip a second time.

Was it just his imagination, or had a shade of gloom crept into his sweet sister's lovely face? Even so, in the state he was in, Reinhard felt more irritated than appreciative at being told to consult Siegfried Kircheis about everything. *Does she think he makes better decisions than I do?* Unbidden, the slaughter on Westerland flashed through his mind, further souring Reinhard's mood. *Maybe Kircheis does make better choices. But it wasn't like I did that because I wanted to. There was sufficient reason.* Ever since Westerland, Duke von Braunschweig had completely lost the hearts of the people. And with all the uprisings and troop defections taking place in the wake of the massacre, the war was now shaping up to end much sooner than initial projections. If you totaled all the numbers, wasn't this a boon to the citizenry at large? Kircheis was too narrowly focused on ideals that didn't work in the real world; it was making him slip into a kind of formulaic moralism.

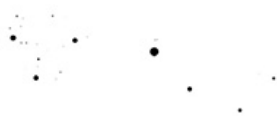
One other thing was bothering Reinhard, though—nowhere in that message had Annerose said anything along the lines of "give my best to Sieg." Did that mean she had sent a separate letter to Kircheis? If so, what had she said to him? Reinhard wanted to know, but given his strangely awkward feelings about Kircheis right now, he just couldn't broach the matter.

Reinhard could criticize Kircheis until he was blue in the face, but let von Oberstein try it, and Reinhard would take up for his redheaded friend every time.

"Even if the whole universe turned against me, Kircheis would stand by my side. He always has. And that's why I've always rewarded him. What's wrong with that?"

To Reinhard's heated words, the chief of staff replied coolly, "Your Excellency, by no means am I suggesting you purge or exile Admiral Kircheis. I'm simply offering a word of caution—that you should treat him the same as you do von Reuentahl, Mittermeier, and the others. Treat him as a subordinate. The organization does not need a number two. Such a person is sure to prove harmful—the competent in his own way, and the fool in his. There should not be anyone who can function as a substitute for the men's loyalty to the number one."

"I understand," Reinhard spat back. "That's enough. Stop badgering me about this." What irritated Reinhard the most was that von Oberstein's argument, as a piece of logic, was sound. Be that as it may, why did that man's words, in spite of their correctness, fail so thoroughly to make an impression?



Mittermeier had come to von Reuentahl's cabin, and the two of them were enjoying a game of poker. A pot of coffee had been set out on the table in preparation for the long war ahead.

"I get the feeling something isn't right between Marquis von Lohengramm and Kircheis," said Mittermeier, at which there appeared a bright gleam in von Reuentahl's mismatched eyes. "You don't think that story is—"

"It's still a rumor," said von Reuentahl, "at least for now."

"Even if it is, that's a dangerous thing to have circulating."

"Extremely dangerous. I wonder if there's anything we can do about it."

"It's a delicate problem. If there's nothing to it, it could be the work of some enemy trying to discredit His Excellency. But if it does check out, that's when things get incredibly rough. Either way, we're not going to be able to stay out of this one."

"That said," von Reuentahl responded, "if we act rashly, we could end up turning a little brush fire into a raging inferno."

The two of them looked at their cards. Both discarded three apiece, then drew. Next to speak was von Reuentahl.

"This has been bothering me for some time now, but our chief of staff seems worried about Marquis von Lohengramm being so close to Kircheis—in his personal as well as public life. It's that idea of his that a number two is harmful. Theoretically, he has a point, but ..."

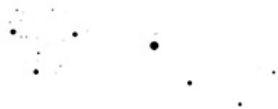
"Von Oberstein?" There was little affection in Mittermeier's voice. "He's a clever man. I'll give him that. But he's got a bad habit of stirring up trouble when there wasn't any before. Things have gone well so far, so why force a change just because something doesn't fit a theory? Especially when it's human relationships we're talking about."

Mittermeier looked at his cards, and the tense line of his mouth softened.

"Four jacks. Looks like tomorrow's wine is on you."

"I've got four of a kind myself," the heterochromiac replied with a mean little smile. "Three queens and a joker. Too bad, Mister Gale Wolf."

"Crap," Mittermeier said, tossing his cards down on the table. Just then, an alarm began to sound. An enemy sortie had just launched from Gaiesburg Fortress.



Young extremist nobles, led by Baron Flegel, had convinced Duke von Braunschweig to attempt this half-cocked sortie.

This didn't mean, however, that all of the aristocracy's allied forces were participating. Merkatz followed his orders without comment, but one influential figure, Admiral Adalbert Fahrenheit, refused to go out at all.

"What's the point of a sortie now?" Fahrenheit shot back at von Braunschweig, anger and scorn brimming in his light-aqua eyes. "We should be using the fortress to our advantage—forcing the enemy to spill as much of their own blood as possible, while we dig in for a long fight and wait for the situation to change. All this sortie is going to accomplish is to make us lose sooner."

He didn't stop there, either. All at once, Fahrenheit unleashed a laundry list of complaints that had been building up for quite some time.

“First of all, Duke von Braunschweig, you and I are comrades in arms—not master and servant. The status of our births may be different, but we are both of us court vassals of the Galactic Empire, and we have both fought to protect the Goldenbaum Dynasty from Marquis von Lohengramm. That should be the objective that binds us together. As a specialist in military affairs, I’ve given you this warning to help you avoid the worst possible outcome. And yet still you take that imperious tone and force your will on all of us. What is it that you’ve misunderstood?”

Duke von Braunschweig turned white with fury at Fahrenheit’s biting criticism. At no time in his life before now had he ever let such insolence pass unanswered. When anger had taken hold of him in the past, a common reaction of his had been to throw wine bottles or glasses from the dinner table at his servants. His mass murder of Westerland’s inhabitants had, in fact, been an extension of that very tendency.

Now as the attack was looming, however, von Braunschweig could feel it in his skin that his support was peeling away. Above all else, he was no longer certain of victory. The duke took a ragged breath, and then, as if mocking his own weak-kneed hesitation, he left Fahrenheit with the words, “I’ve no use for cowards.”

He went and ordered the sortie, ignoring Fahrenheit’s advice.

III

The nobles’ fleet emerged from the fortress, lay down a blistering volley of cannon fire, then charged forward, the noses of their vessels lined up in a row. They were trying to overwhelm the enemy through sheer force.

Reinhard countered with three ranks of gunships equipped with high-output, high-caliber beam cannons, which launched continuous volleys at the oncoming enemy vessels.

The aristocrat forces had no lack of fighting spirit. They launched persistent attacks in waves, pulling back each time they took damage, reforming their ranks, then charging ahead once again. As the number of these assaults and ensuing failures mounted, as the nobles’ backs were driven up against the wall—that fighting spirit seemed somehow even admirable.

At last, Reinhard instructed a swarm of high-speed cruisers he had been holding in reserve to launch a counterattack at maximum battle speed.

His timing was impeccable. Six times, waves of confederated forces had surged forward, only to break on an unyielding shore and drain back out once again. Physical and mental exhaustion had begun to set in on their crews.

Worse still for the aristocrats, the cruisers had been placed under the command of Senior Admiral Siegfried Kircheis.

Reinhard had given his redheaded friend the most important role in this battle. Ordinarily, he would have given the order directly, but with his tangle of emotions still unresolved, he had relayed it through von Oberstein this time.

At the mere mention of Kircheis’s name, soldiers in the aristocrats’ forces became unable to hide their horror. Such was the terror that the young, undefeated admiral was already beginning to strike in the hearts of his enemies.

“You’ve nothing to fear from that redheaded whelp! This is the perfect chance to avenge Marquis von Littenheim!”

But try though the commanders did to raise morale with such cries, it amounted to nothing more than empty bravado. The high-speed cruisers that Kircheis commanded ripped into the nobles' forces with overwhelming speed and ferocity, and then Mittermeier, von Reuentahl, Kempf, and Wittenfeld joined the fray as well. Reinhard's fleet had gone on all-out offense, building rapidly on the advantage won by Kircheis and securing victory almost instantly.

A transmission arrived for von Reuentahl as he was pursuing the fleeing enemy ships. It was from Baron Flegel, one of the enemy commanders. When the baron appeared on-screen, he admitted his defeat but at the same time brought his ship about and issued a challenge to von Reuentahl, requesting a one-on-one duel to the death between their respective battleships.

Von Reuentahl coolly replied, "Don't be absurd. Bark and growl all you like, but we have nothing to gain by fighting defeated enemy remnants on equal footing."

He cut the transmission and continued his advance, flying right past the battleship from which Flegel's gauntlet had been thrown.

After von Reuentahl, Fritz Josef Wittenfeld—leader of the Schwarz Lanzenreiter regiment—was next to appear in front of Baron Flegel. Contrary to his aggressive reputation, though, not even Wittenfeld would respond to Flegel's insane challenge. The victor had been decided already, and fighting on with enemies already resigned to death would, at this stage, be nothing more than a useless waste of soldiers' lives.

"That's enough," said Captain Schumacher, one of Flegel's staff officers. "Please stop this."

Schumacher could hardly bear to watch as his commander ranted madly at the screen. "No one is going to duel with you," Schumacher said. "It would be meaningless to them. More importantly, we should be grateful to still be alive. We can escape now to some other place and start making plans for our comeback."

"Silence!" said Baron Flegel, swatting aside his subordinate's counsel. "What do you mean, 'grateful to still be alive'? I have no fear of death. There's nothing for us now but to fight to the last man and die beautiful deaths, as nobles of the empire have throughout our glorious history."

"Beautiful deaths?" Schumacher laughed, but his smile was bittersweet. "If that's what you have to say, I can see why we lost. All that does is put a pretty face on your own failures and let you wallow in some kind of tragic-heroic fantasy."

"W-what did you say ... ?!"

"Enough, already. If it's a beautiful death you want, go right ahead and die one yourself, but leave us out of it. Why should we go along with this and throw away our lives over your self-centered fantasy?"

"Insolent dog!" the baron cried. He tried to draw his blaster but clumsily dropped it to the floor. He scrambled to pick it up, then took aim at his staff officer's chest.

Before he could fire, however, Baron Flegel's body was pierced by energy beams fired from multiple sidearms.

His uniform riddled with holes, the baron took three, then four wobbling steps. His wide-open eyes seemed to gaze not on his subordinates but on lost days of

glory that would never come again. When he tumbled to the floor, several of those there saw his lips moving, but not one of them could catch his final whisper: “Hail to the empire.” Captain Schumacher knelt down beside him and closed the baron’s eyelids with his hand. The soldiers who had just fragged their commanding officer gathered around him.

“Sir, what will you do now?”

The soldiers trusted in the clearheaded staff officer.

“It’s probably too late for me to join Marquis von Lohengramm’s camp. I’ll go hide out in the Phezzan Land Dominion for a while. Then I’ll think about what to do next.”

“Can we come with you?”

“I certainly don’t mind. But if there’s anyone who doesn’t want to, please let me know. You’re all free to do as you wish, whether it’s allying yourselves with Marquis von Lohengramm or going back to your homeworlds.”

At last, the battleship that was once the property of Baron Flegel departed the battlefield under a new commander, and its battle-worn, battle-scarred hulk disappeared into the depths of space.

On another vessel, a different drama had unfolded. A junior officer had looked on with a cold, hard expression as his ship’s captain had argued for self-destruction and mass suicide. Without a word, he had drawn his blaster and blown the captain’s head off.

“That’s treason!” the first officer had shouted—just moments before being shot to death himself, his hand still on his sidearm. He collapsed atop the captain’s corpse. By that time, crisscrossing flashes of scintillating gunfire were already being exchanged throughout the vessel. The crew had split into two factions—officers and ordinary soldiers—and open battle had broken out between them.

And that was hardly the only vessel where armed clashes had started between soldiers and high-ranking officers. Those of common birth—low-ranking officers, junior officers, and soldiers—refused at the last moment to accompany the boyar nobles on their road to self-destruction.

On one ship, a captain who had long abused his soldiers was thrown headlong into the fusion reactor while still alive. On another, two high-ranking officers who had never been particularly popular among the rank and file were forced to fight each other bare-handed until one was dead. The winner was then ejected from the air lock into hard vacuum. On still another vessel, a soldier who had acted as a spy, informing the captain of his colleagues’ words and deeds, had a rope tied around his neck and was dragged across multiple decks before being shot and killed.

With the madness of battle acting as a catalyst, the anger, the discontent, and the grudges that had been building up for five hundred years finally boiled over. The aristocrats’ vessels became scenes of mutiny, internal strife, and mass lynchings.

The many ships that were overrun by their soldiers stopped their engines, heaved to, and hailed Reinhard’s fleet, saying, “We lay down our arms and humbly beg your leniency ...”

There was one ship, however, where the thirst for revenge was so strong that soldiers forgot to transmit a message of surrender—it exploded in a hail of cannon fire from Reinhard’s fleet. Another opened fire on its fleeing comrades,

signaling through action its intent to switch sides.

In the moment that defeat became a certainty for the aristocrats' forces, the bill came due for five centuries' worth of uninterrupted decadence under an unjust social system. There was no one else to blame; it was simply the tragic result of their own actions.

"It's just as Fräulein von Mariendorf predicted," Reinhard said, watching the screen on the bridge of the flagship *Brünhild*. "The anger of the rank and file against officers of noble birth will be one factor in my victory. A splendid bull's-eye, milady."

"To be honest," said von Oberstein, "I didn't think this standoff would end any time this year, but now matters have been settled surprisingly early. At least insofar as these brigands and usurpers are concerned."

"Brigands and usurpers," Reinhard murmured coldly. Because of his victory—because of the boyars' defeat—the empire's official records would show that the term he had coined for them was just. To judge the defeated was a right naturally granted to the victor, and Reinhard intended to make robust use of it.

Had Reinhard been the one vanquished, they would have given him that notorious appellation, along with an ignominious death. From that perspective, there was no reason to hesitate in using his authority.

"The enemy before us has lost its power already. Presently, you'll return to Odin to make preparations against the enemy behind us."

Reinhard's suggestion was brief, but von Oberstein understood it perfectly. "As you wish."

The next battle would take place not in space but in the palace, where conspiracy would replace the beam cannon as the weapon of choice. It was going to be a battle no less gruesome than those fought between vast fleets of warships.

IV

A triumphant enemy fleet and utter despair were arrayed in front of Merkatz's fleet, blocking his way back to Gaiesburg Fortress.

Merkatz stepped into his private room, pulled out his blaster, and stared at it. This would be the last implement that he used in his lifetime. Merkatz tightened his grip on it and was just pressing its barrel up against his temple when the door opened and his aide came running in.

"Stop that, Your Excellency. Do show some respect for your own life."

"Lieutenant Commander von Schneider ..."

"Forgive me, Excellency. I unloaded the energy capsules earlier for fear you might try something like this." In von Schneider's hand was the dull sheen of the capsules.

With a wry smile, Merkatz tossed the useless blaster onto his desk. Von Schneider picked it up.

The small screen in his private room was showing vivid scenes of the aristocrat fleet, already defeated and now on its way to destruction.

"This is how I imagined things would probably turn out. Now it's all come true. All I was able to do was move this day back just a little." Merkatz turned to look at his aide. "At any rate, when did you pull out those capsules? I never even noticed."

Saying nothing, von Schneider opened up the barrel and showed it to Merkatz. Capsules were still lodged inside. Merkatz's lips came apart slightly. "You tricked me. You'd go that far just to tell me to live, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes, sir. I would, and I did."

"Live to do what? I'm the commander of a defeated force, and from the standpoint of the new authorities, an irredeemable brigand. There's no longer any place in the empire where I can survive. If I were to surrender, Marquis von Lohengramm might forgive me, but even I know what shame is to a warrior."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, Your Excellency, Marquis von Lohengramm does not yet rule the entire universe, and narrow though our galaxy may be, there are still places in it where his reach does not extend. Please, leave the empire so you can stay alive, and make plans to strike back against him someday."

"... You're telling me to defect?"

"I am, Your Excellency."

"Since you're talking about making a comeback, I take it our destination isn't Phezzan. That means it's the other option."

"Yes, Excellency."

"The Free Planets Alliance ..." Merkatz said to himself. That name had an unexpected ring of newness to it. When he had thought about the alliance in times past, he had always ignored the fact of what it was, using by default the traditional term "the rebel entity."

"I've been fighting those people for more than forty years. I've seen a lot of my subordinates killed, and killed just as many of theirs. You think they'd accept someone like me?"

"I suggest we rely on the illustrious Admiral Yang Wen-li. I hear he's a broad-minded person, if a little eccentric. Besides, even if he refuses, we'll only be back to square one. And if it comes to that, you won't be dying alone."

"Idiot. You stay alive. You're not even thirty yet, are you? With your talent, Marquis von Lohengramm would take you on and treat you well."

"I have no hatred for Marquis von Lohengramm, but I've made up my mind that only one admiral will be my commanding officer. Please, Excellency, make up your mind."

Von Schneider waited, and at last his patience was rewarded. Merkatz nodded and said, "All right. I'm in your hands. Let's try Yang Wen-li and see what happens."

V

Gaiesburg Fortress was on the verge of death. Its outer shell was scored by cannon fire. Within, a steady roar of confusion and disorder did not merely reign—it exercised dictatorial powers at its whim.

Duke von Braunschweig, leader of the nobles' confederated military, was calling out weakly, "Commodore Ansbach ... Where is Ansbach?"

Several officers as well as rank-and-file soldiers were moving about nearby, but they all ran away without sparing a glance for the despondent aristocrat. They had been driven to the final option and had no concern left to spare for anyone else.

“Commodore Ansbach!”

“I’m here, Your Excellency.”

That duke turned around and saw his loyal confidant standing there. Several subordinates were with him as well.

“Oh, so that’s where you were. I didn’t see you in the prison, so I’d thought you’d escaped already.”

“My men came and let me out.” The commodore bowed deeply, making no mention of any grudge he might have had about being thrown into prison. “I can imagine the regret you must be feeling, Your Excellency.”

“Yes, I never dreamed things would turn out this way, but now that they have, there’s no longer any choice. We have to sue for peace.”

“For peace?” The commodore blinked.

“I’ll offer him most advantageous terms.”

“What terms?”

“I’ll recognize his authority. Beginning with myself, the aristocracy will support him fully. Those terms aren’t bad at all.”

“Excellency ...”

“Oh yes, that’s right. I’ll give him my daughter, Elisabeth, too. That will make him the previous emperor’s grandson by marriage. Then he’ll have a just claim as successor to the imperial bloodline. That’s much better for him than being saddled with the notoriety of a usurper.”

Ansbach answered with a heavy sigh. “Your Excellency, that will do no good. There is no way Marquis von Lohengramm will accept such conditions. Maybe he would have six months ago, but now he has no need of your support. He’s acquired his position through his own abilities, and now there’s no one who can stand in his way.”

There was a shade of pity in the commodore’s eyes for his lord’s vain struggling. The duke shuddered, and beads of sweat broke out and covered his forehead.

“I am Duke Otto von Braunschweig, the head of a great house unequaled among the nobles of the empire. Are you saying that the golden brat means to kill me, despite all that?”

Ansbach groaned. “Do you still not understand, Excellency? That’s exactly why Marquis von Lohengramm will never leave you alive!”

The duke looked as if his veins had been pumped full of some heavy, viscous fluid. His skin color was changing by the moment, as though the flow of blood throughout his body were stopping and starting up again at irregular intervals.

“And also, because you’re an enemy of human decency,” the commodore appended, a bit mercilessly.

“What?!”

“I’m talking about Westerland. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

Marshaling all his strength, von Braunschweig roared back, “You mean to tell me that killing that lowborn rabble was some sin against common decency? As an aristocrat, and as their ruler, I simply made use of rights that are naturally mine. *Didn’t I?*”

“The commoners don’t think so. Even Marquis von Lohengramm will side with them. Up until now, the Galactic Empire has operated according to the logic of the aristocracy, with Your Excellency foremost among them. But at the current

juncture, half of the universe is going to be governed by a new logic. That's likely another reason why Marquis von Lohengramm will not let Your Excellency live—to make that point clear to everyone. He has to kill you. If he doesn't, then the cause that he stands for will not be achieved.”

A long, long sigh trailed out from the duke's mouth.

“Very well, then. I will die. But I will not stand for that golden brat usurping the throne. He must go to hell with me.”

Ansbach didn't know how to answer.

“Ansbach, somehow, I want you to stop him from usurping the throne. If you'll swear to me that you will, I won't begrudge my own life. Kill him for me, please.”

Ansbach gazed steadily at his leader as flames of obsession blazed up in his eyes, and at last he nodded with calm determination. “As you wish, milord. I swear I will do my best to take von Lohengramm's life. No matter who may become the next emperor, it won't be him.”

“You swear it ... ? Well, good.”

The man who had been greatest among the nobles of the Galactic Empire licked his dry lips. Although his mind was made up, there was a shadow of fear that he hadn't quite shaken.

“I want as easy ... as easy a death as possible.”

“I understand very well. You should use poison. In fact, some has already been prepared.”

They all moved from there to the duke's luxurious apartments. Although deserting soldiers had ransacked it fairly thoroughly, bottles of wine and cognac yet remained in the wine rack.

From his pocket, the commodore pulled out a tiny capsule no larger than the nail of his little finger. It was a compound of two types of drugs. One blocked brain cells from absorbing oxygen, inviting swift brain death. The other had the effect of paralyzing the nerves through which pain was transmitted.

“You're going to get sleepy very quickly, and then you'll die with no pain at all. Please stir it into some wine and drink.”

Ansbach selected a bottle from the wine rack, checked the label, and saw that it was a fine 410 vintage. He poured some into a glass, then broke open the capsule, exposing the granules inside.

Watching this from where he was seated in a high-backed chair, Duke von Braunschweig abruptly began to tremble all over. The light of sanity had vanished from his eyes.

“Ansbach, no. I don't want to do this.” He spoke in a strangled voice. “I don't want to die. I'll surrender. I'll give up my lands, my titles ... everything but my life ...”

The commodore took a deep breath and gave a sign to his men on the right and left. Two large, powerfully built men stepped forward and laid hands on Duke von Braunschweig to hold him down in the chair, even though one would have been enough.

“What are you doing! Unhand me, you impertinent—”

“As the final head of Braunschweig Duchy's ruling family, please do this yourself with grace and dignity.”

Ansbach picked up the wineglass and brought it to the lips of the immobilized duke. Von Braunschweig clenched his teeth tightly, determined not to drink the

poison. Ansbach pinched the duke's nose. Unable to breathe, his face turned red, and in the instant he could hold his breath no longer, he opened his mouth, and the poisoned wine made a crimson waterfall as it poured deep into the boyar's throat.

Great swells of terror rolled in the duke's eyes, but they lasted for only a few seconds. As a stone-faced Ansbach stood watching, the duke's eyelids drooped and his muscles began to go slack. When his head started nodding, the commodore gave orders that the duke be carried to the infirmary. His subordinates hesitated.

"But, sir, he's already dead ..."

"Which is why I want you to do so. Now do as you're told."

It was a strange answer the commodore had given. His eyes followed his subordinates as they followed his order, heads cocked sideways, uncomprehending. In a low voice, he muttered to himself, "The Golden Bough is now all but fallen. What comes next will be known as ... what? The Green Forest?"

Gräfin von Grünewald—"Countess of Green Forests"—that was the title that Reinhard's sister Annerose had received from the previous emperor, Friedrich IV ...



The old soldier was carrying a tiny palm computer as he walked alone through the corridors, seemingly not knowing what to do with himself. A junior officer driving a hydrogen car pulled over and shouted at him:

"Hey! What do you think you're doing at a time like this? How about you run for it or make a white flag? Von Lohengramm's army's gonna charge in here any minute now!"

The old soldier turned around with his whole body but didn't move an inch. "What's your rank?" he said.

"You'd know if you'd look at my insignia. It's chief petty officer. What about it?"

"Chief petty officer? That would mean 2,840 imperial marks."

"What's that supposed to mean, old-timer?"

"Look here—this is a Reichsbank transfer certificate. Walk into any branch on any planet, and if you've got one of these, you can trade it for cash."

The chief petty officer groaned. "Listen, Grandpa, do you have any idea what's happening right now? The world's about to change today."

"Today's payday," the old man said in an easygoing voice. "I'm in charge of payroll. You said the world's changing, but all that means is they're swapping out the folks at the top. Underlings like us still gotta eat, and you don't get to eat unless you get paid. At least in that sense, nothing changes no matter who's in charge."

"All right, I get it already. Get in the car. I'll drive you to where the ones who want to surrender are gathering."

After the car carrying the junior officer and the old soldier has sped off down the corridor, a young nobleman with the rank of captain appeared in the passage, searching for heavy arms. He hadn't given up on resistance quite yet.

"I think I remember this warehouse being empty," he mumbled to himself, nevertheless pulling open the door in hopes that there might be something left there anyway. What he saw, however, made his eyes snap open wide in surprise.

Inside the warehouse was a mountain of military supplies. There were rations, medical products, clothing, blankets, and everything from small arms to ammunition. Five or six soldiers and junior officers stood frozen in midstep, staring in surprise at this unexpected intruder.

The captain started shouting. "What is the meaning of this? Where did this materiel come from?!"

The look on the captain's face frightened the junior officers. Even so, they didn't drop the portable ration boxes they were carrying in both arms, and this only incensed the captain further.

"Cat got your tongue? Then let me answer for you. You were hiding these supplies to keep for yourself, instead of sending them to the front lines. Weren't you?"

The answer to the captain's question was written eloquently all over the junior officers' faces. The captain's anger toward those "shrewd common folk" burst through the bounds of reason and boiled over.

"Shameless dogs, don't you move from that spot. I'm going to teach you lot some discipline!"

Screams and shouts rang out back and forth, but finally a blanket was thrown over the captain's head, and not ten seconds had elapsed before he was shot dead. As an aristocrat, the young captain had believed that, even under the shadow of total defeat, soldiers would not resist being punished by the officers.



The sporadic resistance drew to a close, and the first of the admirals to step into the fortress once it was completely secured were Mittermeier and von Reuentahl.

To their right and their left, captured nobles were lined up against the walls of a corridor leading to a large reception hall. Frightened by the guns Reinhard's troops carried, the injured, filthy nobles had sunk to the floor.

Mittermeier shook his head slowly. "I never dreamed the day would come when I'd see boyar nobles looking this miserable. Can we really call this the start of a new era?"

"One thing's for certain—it's definitely the end of the old one," said von Reuentahl. Nobles were looking up at them without a sliver of hostility in their eyes. Only fear and uncertainty were there, as well as a shade of hope to curry favor with the victors. When their eyes met, there were even some who constructed subservient smiles. Mittermeier and von Reuentahl were at first astonished, then disgusted. But when they thought about it, was not this itself

clear proof of their victory?

“Their age is over. From now on, it’s our age.”

The two young admirals held their heads up proudly and continued walking, passing between the ranks of the defeated.

CHAPTER 9

FAREWELL, DISTANT DAYS

September 9. Gaiesburg Fortress.

In the entrance to the ballroom where the victory ceremony was being held, the guards were admonishing Siegfried Kircheis not to bring his weapon into the hall. The redheaded youth removed the blaster from his belt but then decided to ask, “I’m Senior Admiral Kircheis—are you sure I’m not allowed to carry my weapon?”

“We can’t make exceptions, not even for Admiral Kircheis. I’m terribly sorry, but those are our orders ...”

“I see. Never mind, then. It’s all right.”

Kircheis held his blaster out to the guard. Up until now, Reinhard had always allowed Kircheis to carry his weapon, even at times when all the other admirals had to go unarmed. This had communicated to the admirals that Kircheis was second only to Reinhard himself. However, the usual custom seemed to have been changed today.

Kircheis went in and joined the ranks of the other admirals who had come in before him. They nodded politely to him when he arrived, and he nodded back. There were subtle gleams in the eyes of von Reuentahl and Mittermeier. No doubt they knew something had happened between Reinhard and Kircheis.

I can’t let myself start thinking I hold some privileged position, Kircheis warned himself. Still, there was nothing he could do about the flashes of sadness that kept shooting through his heart.

Were he and Reinhard now nothing more than lord and subject?

That’s all we could ever be, though, Kircheis thought, trying to shake loose the sadness clinging to him. *After all, those below shouldn’t seek equal relations with those above. I’ll wait awhile before saying anything else. Lord Reinhard might lose his way and make mistakes, but in the end I’m sure he’ll eventually understand. Up until now, hasn’t he always, through all these eleven years?*

Up until now? Kircheis was starting to discover an unease in his own heart. Up until now, things certainly had always turned out that way, and he had believed that they always would. He might have been getting ahead of himself, though ...

The coordinator of ceremonies announced Reinhard’s entrance with a cry so loud he seemed to be showing off his lung capacity.

“The commander in chief of the armed forces of the Galactic Empire, His Highness the Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm!”

As Reinhard entered the hall and strode down its scarlet carpet, the officers arrayed on both sides bowed to him in unison.

In due time, they would bow lower and lower, until at last their bows would become the most reverent of all official obeisance—that which was made only to the one person in all the universe who received the imperial crown. Another two or three years, and this golden-haired youth, born to an impoverished family that was nobility in name only, would achieve all his ambitions.

Just as his gaze was about to connect with Kircheis’s, Reinhard averted his eyes unconsciously. He had taken von Oberstein’s advice about not letting Kircheis wear weapons at events where his colleagues could not. Reinhard was the conqueror. Reinhard was the lord. Kircheis was just one of his subordinates. Reinhard mustn’t give him special rights and the sense of privilege that came with them. Up until now, he had made too little distinction between his public and private selves. From this day forward, he would have Kircheis stop calling him “Reinhard.” Kircheis would have to call him “Marquis von Lohengramm” or “Your Excellency” or “Imperial Marshal,” just like all of the other admirals. Power and authority belonged only to the lord and master.

Reinhard began the victory ceremony by giving audience to high-ranking officers who had been taken prisoner. After several of these had filed through, Admiral Adalbert Fahrenheit, an old acquaintance of Reinhard’s, came before him.

“Fahrenheit ... it’s been ages, hasn’t it? I last saw you at Astarte, I believe.”

“Yes, milord ...”

There was no shame in the admiral’s pale-aqua eyes. By the same token, Reinhard did not look down on this defeated admiral, either—not when he had fought so valiantly.

“Joining with Duke von Braunschweig was a mistake most unlike you. Why not follow me instead and preserve your warrior’s life?”

“I am a soldier of the empire. As Your Excellency has taken the reins of military authority, I will humbly follow. I may have taken a roundabout way to get here, but I want to start making up for lost time right away.”

Reinhard nodded. Fahrenheit’s shackles were removed, and he took his place among the ranks of officers. In similar fashion, other talented officers thronged to Reinhard’s camp one after another as the ceremony progressed. He didn’t need to rely on Kircheis for everything after all, did he? Although he did regret having somehow let Merkatz slip through his fingers ...

A stir of hushed voices rose up from the far end of the assembled ranks. The body of Duke von Braunschweig, sealed within a case of special glass, had just been carried into the room. Deeply moved, the people looked on at the lifeless form of the empire’s greatest aristocrat lying in the case, clad in his military dress uniform.

Commodore Ansbach accompanied the coffin.

Standing in the entrance to the great hall, Ansbach, said to have been the right hand of the late duke, directed a stone-faced bow toward the young conqueror and began walking toward him with slow footsteps.

Sounds of hushed but unmistakable laughter trickled out from among the

attendees, a frank expression of the warriors' hostility toward a sniveling little man who had come to beg mercy, bringing his master's corpse as a gift.

Like lashes from an invisible scourge, that laughter beat against every inch of Ansbach's body. That Reinhard did not put a stop to it was due to a youthful, mercilessly fastidious side of his personality.

Ansbach came before Reinhard, bowed reverently, and pressed a button. The lid of the glass case opened.

To let the victor inspect the corpse of his defeated master?

No, it wasn't that.

In the moment that it happened, witnesses could not understand the meaning of the sight. Ansbach's hands reached out for his master's corpse, tore open his uniform, and from within pulled out a strange-looking object composed of parts resembling boxes and tubes. A jury-rigged hand cannon—a powerful, miniaturized particle-beam weapon created for use in infantry combat.

Courageous veteran admirals stood frozen in place, looking on, dumbstruck. And it wasn't just them. Reinhard himself, while aware of everything that was happening, was unable to move so much as a muscle.

The barrel swung toward the golden-haired youth.

"Marquis von Lohengramm, I claim your life in the name of my lord and master, Duke von Braunschweig!" Ansbach's voice rang out, overwhelming the silence, as the hand cannon roared and spat out tongues of flame.

The hand cannon had enough firepower to destroy an armored vehicle or a single-seat spacecraft in one shot. Reinhard's body should have been blown apart, leaving nothing but scattered chunks of meat. But the shot missed. A wall about two meters to Reinhard's left collapsed in an explosion of shattered masonry and white smoke. The shock wave struck Reinhard hard on the cheek.

A cry of regret burst from Ansbach's lungs. In that infinitely long instant when everyone was paralyzed, there had been only one man who had managed to take action.

The man who had thrown himself at Ansbach and turned aside the hand cannon's barrel was Siegfried Kircheis.

The hand cannon fell to the floor with a noisy clatter. The redheaded youth, superior to his opponent in speed and strength, grabbed one wrist of the failed assassin and twisted, trying to force him to the ground. A fierce expression flashed across Ansbach's face, however, and with a sharp, graceful movement, he pressed the back of his free hand up against Kircheis's chest.

A silvery-white beam exploded from the redheaded youth's back. Ansbach had also worn a laser gun disguised as a ring.

Kircheis, impaled through the midst of his chest on that murderous beam of light, felt pain tearing through his body, but he would not let go of the assassin's wrist. Again the ring shone with its ominous light, and this time the beam pierced his carotid artery.

There was a bizarre sound, like several harp strings snapping all at once, and then a fountain of bright-red blood burst from the back of Kircheis's neck. The drops beat against the marble floor like the rain of a sudden squall.

Perhaps it was that sound that finally broke the shackles of astonishment that had held the others still for the past ten seconds. With boots pounding, the admirals ran forward and wrestled Ansbach to the floor. There was a dull crack as

his wrist broke. In spite of two serious wounds and major blood loss, Kircheis had still kept his hold.

Kircheis had dropped to his knees, and Mittermeier pressed his handkerchief against the back of his neck. The white silk was stained crimson in no time.

“Call a medic! We need a medic over here!”

“It’s ... too late.”

The young man was gasping. It wasn’t just his hair that was red now; his whole body was dyed crimson. The admirals were speechless. They knew from long experience that nothing could be done for wounds such as these.

Ansbach had been dragged down into the puddle of Kircheis’s blood, and Kempf, Wittenfeld, and the rest were holding him down. But another surprise was waiting for the admirals when Ansbach started laughing in a parched voice.

“Duke von Braunschweig, forgive this useless servant who couldn’t keep his oath. It looks like the golden brat won’t be joining you in hell for a few years yet!”

“Bloody scoundrel! How dare you!”

Kempf struck him with the flat of his hand. As Ansbach’s battered head lolled back against the floor, he spoke once more: “Though I was lacking in ability, I go to be with you now ...”

Realizing what Ansbach intended, von Reuentahl shouted “*Stop him!*” and lunged toward the assassin’s body. Just before he could lay hands on the man, though, Ansbach’s lower jaw made a slight movement as he bit into a poison capsule that was hidden among his molars. Von Reuentahl grabbed him by the throat and tried to stop him from swallowing, but his persistence made no difference in the end.

Ansbach’s eyes opened wide and lost focus.



Reinhard stood in darkness.

His ice-blue eyes saw neither the admirals nor the man who had tried to kill him. All he could see was his friend—his redheaded best friend ... who had just now saved his life.

He had saved his life—of course he had; no matter the time, no matter the place, Kircheis had always come running to save him. Ever since the day they met as children, Kircheis had always been his red-haired friend—protecting him from all the enemies he’d made, listening to his problems, putting up with his selfishness ... His friend? No, he was more than a friend ... more than a brother ... He was *Siegfried Kircheis*! And he had tried to treat him like all the other admirals. If Kircheis had been carrying his gun, the assassin would have been shot dead the instant he grabbed the hand cannon. Not one drop of Kircheis’s blood would have been spilled.

It was all his fault. Kircheis was on the floor bleeding, and it was all his fault.

“Kircheis ...”

“Lord Reinhard ... thank heavens you’re safe ...”

Oblivious to the blood that stained his dress uniform, the golden-haired youth fell to his knees and took his friend's hand—though the sight of him was already becoming blurred in Kircheis's field of view. *Was this what it was like to die?* Kircheis thought. Sensations from all five senses were fading as if with distance. The world was narrowing rapidly, and everything was growing darker. Things he wanted to see, he couldn't see anymore; things he wanted to hear, he could hear no longer. Strangely, there was no fear. Perhaps his worst fear had been a possibility he had already been facing—that he was not going to be able to spend the rest of his life with Reinhard. More importantly, though, there was something he had to say. Something he had to tell Reinhard before the last of his strength flowed out.

"Lord Reinhard, I don't think I can help you anymore ... Please forgive me."

"Idiot! Don't talk that way!" Reinhard had meant to shout those words but had only barely managed to say them in a quavering whisper. The young man's preternatural beauty exceeded all propriety, the dazzling elegance that came to him so naturally regularly overwhelmed those who met him ... yet in that moment, Reinhard looked as helpless as a small child, one too young to walk without clinging to the wall.

"Medics will be here soon. They'll patch those wounds right up. As soon as you've recovered, we'll go see my sister and tell her that we've won. Let's do that!"

"Lord Reinhard ..."

"Don't talk until the medics come."

"Take this universe for your own—"

"... I will."

"—and then tell Miss Annerose ... tell her that Sieg kept the promise that he made when we were young ..."

"No." Reinhard's bloodless lips were trembling. "I refuse to tell her any such thing. You do it. Tell her yourself. I won't. You understand? We are going to see my sister *together!*"

Kircheis seemed to smile faintly. And when that hint of a smile faded, Reinhard realized with a fleeting shudder that half of himself had just been lost forever.

"Kircheis. Answer me, Kircheis! Why don't you answer?!"

Mittermeier couldn't bear to watch any more. He put one hand on the shoulder of the young imperial marshal and said, "It's too late, sir. He's gone. We should let him rest peacefully now—"

But the rest of his words he swallowed without a sound. There was a light like he had never seen before in the eyes of his young senior officer.

"Don't you lie to me, Mittermeier. What you said is a lie. Kircheis would never die first. He would never leave me behind."

II

"How is Marquis von Lohengramm?"

"Still no change. He just sits there, unmoving."

Both the question and the answer were spoken in grave tones.

The admirals had gathered in the Gun Room, one of Gaiesburg Fortress's clubs for high-ranking officers. The boyar nobles had at one time spared no expense in

decorating this wide, luxurious salon, but those who had prevailed over them now had no interest in it whatsoever.

The admirals had imposed a strict gag order regarding the tragedy at the victory ceremony, and the fortress was being managed jointly in accordance with military discipline. Still, it had been three days now, and everyone knew things were reaching a breaking point. They couldn't simply maintain FTL silence with Odin indefinitely.

Kircheis's body had been placed inside a refrigerated case in order to preserve it, but Reinhard, overcome with regret, remained right by its side, neither eating nor sleeping day in and day out. The admirals were getting worried.

"Still, to be honest," said Müller, "I never imagined the marquis had such a fragile place in his heart."

"He wouldn't be acting like that if it was me or you who had died," replied Mittermeier. "Siegfried Kircheis is—or was—something special. The marquis has lost half of his own self, as it were. And because of his own mistake, no less." The other admirals all acknowledged the soundness of that insight, although doing so made them all the more fidgety about wasting time like this.

Von Reuentahl's heterochromatic eyes flashed sharply then, and he spoke to his colleagues in a strong tone of voice: "We're going to get Marquis von Lohengramm back on his feet again. We have to. If we don't, that means that all of us will sing a chorus of destruction to the depths of the galaxy."

"Still, what should we do? How do we help him get over this?"

That voice belonged to Wittenfeld, who sounded like he was at an utter loss. Kempf, Wahlen, and Lutz maintained a heavy silence.

Any one of these assembled admirals could raise one hand to make tens of thousands of ships mobilize and millions of soldiers take up arms. But not even heroes who could traverse at will the sea of stars—destroying worlds and conquering entire star systems—could think of a way to get a young man back on his feet when he was overcome by sorrow and loss.

Finally, it was von Reuentahl who murmured, "If there is a solution, I know who'll have it."

Mittermeier's head tilted. "Who do you have in mind?"

"You should know. He's the only one who isn't here right now—Chief of Staff von Oberstein."

The admirals looked at one another.

"You're saying we need *his* help?" Mittermeier couldn't conceal the note of disgust in his voice.

"We've no choice. Besides, he knows very well that Marquis von Lohengramm is the only reason he's here. And that being the case, I suspect there's a reason he hasn't done something already—he's waiting for us to come to him."

"In that case, doesn't that imply he's going to expect something in return? What do we do if he wants the right to overrule our decisions in certain cases?"

"All of us, von Oberstein included, are riding on the good ship *Lohengramm*. To save oneself, one has to save the ship. And supposing von Oberstein did try to take advantage of the situation for his own benefit, it would simply be a matter of taking appropriate measures ourselves to get back at him."

Von Reuentahl finished speaking, and the other admirals nodded to one another. That was when a security officer appeared and announced the arrival of

von Oberstein.

"You showed up at just the right time," Mittermeier said. His lack of affection was clear from his tone.

Von Oberstein stepped into the room, looked around at those there assembled, and began to criticize them without reservation. "Considering how long your discussion has gone on, I take it no conclusion is forthcoming."

"Well, since our force is currently missing its number one *and* number two, we don't seem to have anyone presiding here." Von Reuentahl's words were harsh; he was taking a jab at the fact that von Oberstein's "number two" theory had in effect led to the death of Kircheis. "So then, does the chief of staff have a good idea?"

"I can't say I don't."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"To ask Marquis von Lohengramm's sister."

"Countess von Grünewald? We thought about that too, but will that alone be enough to get us anywhere?"

The words were von Reuentahl's, but the fact of the matter was that nobody wanted to take on the job of reporting to Annerose what had happened.

"Leave that to me, but I do have something for all of you to do: I need you to capture the man who killed Kircheis."

Even the quick-witted von Reuentahl couldn't grasp the meaning of that sentence right away. His heterochromatic eyes open slightly wider in spite of himself.

"That's an odd thing to say. The killer was Ansbach, wasn't it?"

"Ansbach was small fry. We're going to make someone else out to be the real plotter. A very big fish."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a form of psychological perversion," von Oberstein explained, "but in his heart, Reinhard is crying out for the killer to be someone big. He cannot endure the thought that Kircheis was murdered by the likes of Ansbach—a mere underling of Duke von Braunschweig. This creates a necessity for Kircheis to have been murdered by a much more significant foe. Therefore, we need to find someone big who was at work behind Ansbach in the shadows. Such an individual does not, in fact, exist. Which is why we will simply have to manufacture one."

"Hmm. But whom can we frame as the ringleader? The boyar nobles are all but extinct now. Is there anyone who fits that scenario?"

"Oh, I have an excellent candidate."

"Who?" Mittermeier asked doubtfully.

"The imperial prime minister, Duke Klaus Lichtenlade."

Everyone in the room was left speechless for a moment. Mittermeier looked like he had been physically struck. The gazes of the other admirals, too, were focused on the chief of staff, with his artificial eye. They could guess what he intended: he wanted to put this crisis to work for them in order to eliminate a latent enemy.

"I wouldn't want to make you my enemy," said Mittermeier. "There's no way I'd ever win."

At least on the surface, von Oberstein ignored the deep malice evident in

Mittermeier's words.

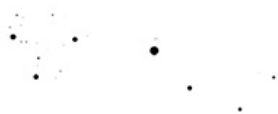
"Duke Lichtenlade will need to be eliminated sooner or later. And it isn't as if his heart is as pure as an angel's, either. There's no doubt he's weaving conspiracies of his own to eliminate Marquis von Lohengramm."

"So what you're saying is this wouldn't be an entirely false accusation. I can see that. That old man is certainly a schemer." Von Reuentahl, speaking in a low voice, sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

"We return to Odin as quickly as possible, arrest Duke Lichtenlade, and seize the imperial seal. Do that, and we can establish dictatorial powers for Marquis von Lohengramm."

Mittermeier, in an attempt at sarcasm, said, "But what do we do if the person who takes the imperial seal stays on Odin and tries to become a dictator himself?"

Von Oberstein replied, "There's no fear of that. Even if one of you had such ambitions, he would be stopped by admirals of similar rank. None of you would just obediently stand leeward of a man who'd been your equal up to now. In fact, that's the very reason I say we don't need a number two."



Power is justified not by how you get it but by how you use it.

The admirals recognized the truth of that saying, and it led them to make a monumental decision.

Conspiracy and trickery were unavoidable. Now was the time to purge the court of Marquis von Lohengramm's hidden enemies and seize the full power of the government. Von Oberstein's strategy was exactly what they needed. If they stood by and did nothing, they would simply be handing the initiative over to the enemy.

The admirals went into action. Von Oberstein, Mecklinger, and Lutz stayed behind at Gaiesburg to run security, while the others, leading the cream of their elite military forces, hurried off toward Odin.

In this way, they made the opening move against the palace coup that Duke Lichtenlade was sure to attempt sooner or later. Driven by their determination, they made the twenty-day journey from Gaiesburg to Odin in fourteen.

"Gale Wolf" Mittermeier scathingly told his subordinates, "Leave any ships that fall out of the column behind. I'll just hope they can make it to Odin sometime."

At the time he departed Gaiesburg, he was commanding a fleet of high-speed cruisers numbering twenty thousand, but that number decreased with every successive warp, and by the time they reached the Valhalla Stellar Region, where Odin was located, only three thousand ships remained.

Müller used eight hundred of these to take control of satellite orbit, while the other admirals plunged into the atmosphere. That many simultaneous landings were beyond the spaceport's traffic controllers' ability to handle, and half the fleet was forced to make water landings in lakes.

It was midnight where Neue Sans Souci Palace was located. Mittermeier

headed straight for the prime minister's office. It was von Reuentahl who led the raid on Duke Lichtenlade's residence. The prime minister was sitting in bed reading when the young officer with heterochromatic eyes kicked in the door and charged inside.

"What is the meaning of this?! What are you lowborn fools rioting about?" the prime minister scolded von Reuentahl.

"Your Excellency, Prime Minister Klaus Lichtenlade: I am placing you under arrest."

What ran through the elderly ruler's mind at that moment was not so much surprise as a feeling of defeat. The old man had hoped to monopolize all power and authority himself, and bring about Reinhard's fall with a single push from behind—but now he had been beaten to the punch by von Oberstein's insight and the admirals' actions.

"On what grounds?" he said.

"You were the sponsor of the failed assassination attempt against His Excellency, Marquis Reinhard von Lohengramm."

The elderly prime minister's eyes widened. For a long moment he stood glaring at von Reuentahl's face. Then a shudder ran through his slender frame, and he spat out, "Foolish dolt. What proof do you have to be spouting such nonsense? I am the imperial prime minister. I stand above you in assisting His Highness."

"And at the same time are a lawless conspirator," von Reuentahl said coldly. He shouted to his soldiers, "Arrest him!"

Soldiers of common birth violently grabbed the arm of the old highborn aristocrat, a man whom they once could not even have approached.

At the same time, a squad led by Mittermeier was charging into the building housing the offices of the prime minister and his staff.

"Where is the imperial seal?" Mittermeier demanded of an elderly bureaucrat who was working the night shift. Though he went white as a sheet when he found himself surrounded by gun muzzles, he refused to divulge the seal's whereabouts.

"By what authority do you ask? This is indeed the Imperial Seal Room, and the office of the prime minister. It's not a place where military officials unrelated to our work can come barging in in the middle of the night. Please withdraw now."

At that, Mittermeier acted swiftly to keep the bloodlust of his men from getting out of hand. He acknowledged the old bureaucrat's courage and didn't want to see him harmed. Even so, that didn't mean he was going to back down. He signaled to his men, and the soldiers went into the room, fanned out, and began ransacking what had, until a short while ago, been a holy place that not even a ministry head or an imperial marshal would have dared enter without permission. Cabinets and desks were turned over, and important documents not allowed outside the room spilled onto the floor, to be trod beneath the soles of military-issue boots.

"Please stop this," the old man cried. "Is this what you think of the empire's—of the imperial family's—authority? You should be ashamed of yourselves. This is an act unworthy of imperial subjects."

"The imperial family's authority? I think I've heard of that. It was something they used to have a long time ago." Mittermeier was talking big now. "But ultimately, it's the use of force that gives authority its meaning, not the other way around. Just look in there—I think you'll understand quite well."

One soldier shouted out joyfully and held a tiny box up high in his hand. It was adorned on the lid and all around its edges with a classical grape arabesque pattern.

"This is it! I've found it!"

With a scream, the old bureaucrat ran toward the soldier and tried to grab him, but he was pummeled to the ground by other soldiers first. Faithful to his office, the old man crawled across the floor, blood dropping from a cut on his forehead.

Mittermeier opened the box and, without feeling particularly moved or impressed, stared at the gold-plated seal he found wrapped in crimson velvet within. The two-headed eagle that formed its handle stared back at him like a living creature.

So this is the imperial seal? he thought.

Mittermeier gave a low laugh, glanced down at the man lying on the floor, and gave orders to have a doctor summoned.

For the imperial capital of Odin, the civil war both began and ended amid subjugation by Reinhard's admirals.

Count von Mariendorf's daughter Hilda was already in bed when it started, but once she was told about the disturbance in the city, she threw a robe on over her nightgown and went out onto the mansion's balcony.

There she could hear all the sounds of the military: the loud and the soft, the strong and the weak—a symphony borne to her ears on the night wind.

While she was listening, a messenger came and said in a fearful voice, "Where did they come from, milady?"

"Armies don't just bubble up out of the ground," she said. "Aside from Marquis von Lohengramm's, there can't be any force with numbers like these."

Yielding her short hair to the night wind's hesitant caresses, Hilda continued to speak, as if to herself. "It looks like some lively times are ahead for us. Of course, things are sure to get a little crazy, but I'll still take that over stagnation any day."

III

... Had he been dreaming?

Reinhard looked around. The room was dim, chilly, and utterly silent. Aside from himself, there was only Kircheis—lying in a case made of special glass—and the cold, dry air. His redheaded friend did not move, nor speak, nor breathe.

So it had been a dream, after all. Reinhard's shoulders drooped, and he pulled up the collar of his uniform cloak as he closed his eyes.

... Annerose, having received leave from the emperor, had invited Reinhard and Kircheis to a mountain villa in Freuden. It had been the first time they had seen each other in a year and a half. The blond-haired boy and the redheaded boy, dressed in their military school uniforms, adjusting each other's hats and collars, had come running from their stiff and formal dormitory.

It was a six-hour trip by landcar. This was because flight over the imperial family's lands was forbidden. There were flower gardens there and mountains capped with snow year-round. But the contrasting beauty of pure white and rainbow colors was soon blotted out by the dark grays of heavy rain that arrived with rolling thunder. The three of them spent the whole vacation cooped up

inside the villa. However, that had been enjoyable in its own way. Throwing wood into the fireplace, they had sung every song they knew, while reflections of golden flames danced in their eyes ...

Reinhard's recollections, however, were suddenly interrupted.

"Von Oberstein here, Your Excellency," said a voice with neither emotion nor life. "An FTL has arrived for you from Odin."

After a moment's hesitation, Reinhard answered: "Who is it from?"

"Your sister, the Countess von Grünewald."

The young man who for hours—for days—had stirred not a muscle abruptly rose to his feet. It was as if a sculpture had suddenly sprung to life. Angry blue flames practically leapt from his eyes.

"You've told her! You've told my sister about Kircheis, haven't you!"

The chief of staff took the full force of Reinhard's boiling anger without even flinching.

"I did. In an FTL just now."

"How dare you! That's none of your business!"

"Perhaps, but you certainly can't hide this forever."

"Shut up!"

"Are you afraid? Of your sister, I mean."

"What did you just say!"

"If not, please speak with her. Your Excellency, I haven't given up on you yet. I find it praiseworthy that you're blaming only yourself and not trying to force it on me. However, if you continue to dwell in the past and refuse to face the future, then it's over for you. The universe will fall into the hands of another man. And Admiral Kircheis will look down from Valhalla and be ashamed to have known you."

Reinhard shot a look at von Oberstein that could have incinerated him where he stood, but afterward he stamped past him and went into his private communications room.

The comm screen displayed the fresh, unadorned beauty of Annerose's face. The young imperial marshal struggled to suppress a shudder and tried to control his pounding heart.

"Annerose ..."

That was all that Reinhard said before he became unable to move his tongue.

Annerose stared at her brother. Her cheeks were white—too white. There were no tears in her blue eyes. What was there was something greater.

"My poor, poor Reinhard ..." Annerose murmured. That low voice stabbed the golden-haired youth through the heart. He understood perfectly the meaning of his sister's words. For the sake of power, for authority, he had tried to treat his other self as a mere lackey and had received horrific retribution for such poverty of spirit.

"You've lost everything you had to lose now, haven't you?"

At last, Reinhard managed to speak. "... No, I still have you. I do ... don't I, Annerose? Don't I?"

"That's right. We have nothing left but one another now."

Something in her tone made Reinhard gasp. And had Annerose noticed the change in her brother's expression?

"Reinhard, I'm moving out of the mansion in Schwarzen. I wonder if I could

have just a small cottage somewhere?”

“Annerose ...”

“And also, for the time being, I don’t think we should see one another.”

“Annerose!”

“It’s better if I’m not by your side. The way we’re living our lives is just too different ... All I have is the past. But you have a future.”

Again, Reinhard found himself speechless.

“When you’re tired, come and see me. But it’s too early for you to be tired yet.”

She was right. Reinhard had lost the right to long for the past and even the ability to rest when he was tired. Because Kircheis had kept his vow, he now had to keep his vow to Kircheis as well.

He had to make this universe his own. Whatever it took, he had to do what was necessary for the sake of that goal. After all, when he thought of the immensity of what he had lost, it would be a shame if he couldn’t even do a little thing like that in return.

“I see. If that’s what you want, then I’ll do as you wish. I’ll come and get you when the universe is mine. But before you go, please tell me one thing.”

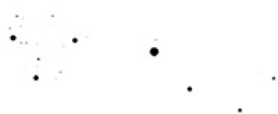
Reinhard swallowed and steadied his breathing.

“Did you ... did you love Kircheis?”

And then fearfully, fearfully, he looked his sister in the eye.

She didn’t answer. Even so, Reinhard had never seen his sister looking so porcelain white as she did at that moment, nor had he ever seen such sadness in her face. He knew that he would likely carry the memory of that expression for as long as he lived.

And in that supposition, he was correct.



Von Reuentahl took the job of reporting to Gaiesburg Fortress, but not willingly. After trying for some time to push that duty off on one another, the admirals had at last decided to settle the matter at the card table, and there the young heterochromiac’s luck had completely abandoned him.

He hailed Gaiesburg from Reinhard’s admiralität. Reinhard appeared on the screen right away. The sharp gleam of reason and spirit shone in his ice-blue eyes, and when he saw those eyes, von Reuentahl knew that his young lord had found himself again. Reinhard’s speech was also lucid, and his voice had its strength back. However, von Reuentahl felt that something still wasn’t quite right.

“I’m aware of the situation,” he said. “I heard about it from von Oberstein. On the day that you left.”

“I see ...”

“Your distinguished service will be richly rewarded. I’ll soon be returning to Odin as well. Can I get you to send someone to meet me on the way?”

“Yes, milord. I’ll send Mittermeier.”

After palming that duty off to his colleague, von Reuentahl told Reinhard the

reason he had called.

"We've arrested and interned Duke Lichtenlade's entire family. Once you've returned, we would ask you to pass judgment on them."

"There's no need to wait for me. I can do so from here right now and leave it to you to carry out their sentences. How's that?"

"Very good, milord. What should we do with Duke Lichtenlade himself?"

"We can't execute someone who was imperial prime minister. Advise him to commit suicide. In some painless fashion."

"As you wish. And his family?"

"Exile the women and children to the frontier," Reinhard's voice resembled the sound made when pieces of ice strike one another. "And execute all males aged ten and up."

"... As you wish." As might be expected, von Reuentahl could not reply to that right away.

"Ages nine and under are not to be harmed, then?" he said, perhaps seeking a sort of roundabout indulgence. Von Reuentahl was a courageous admiral who took no pleasure in needless bloodshed.

"I was ten years old when I entered military school," Reinhard said. "Until that age, you could say I was still not fully formed. So I'll spare them. If they want to try and kill me once they've grown up, let them come. After all, if a conqueror lacks ability, it's only natural that he be overthrown himself."

Reinhard laughed. It was an elegant laugh, but it seemed to have a slightly different ring than it had in the past.

"And the same goes for all of you. If you have the confidence and you're ready to risk everything, go ahead. Challenge me anytime."

A thin smile brimmed like a heat mirage on his graceful lips. Shivers ran like waves through every nerve in von Reuentahl's body. He didn't realize how tense his voice sounded when he said, "Surely you must be joking."

Reinhard had shed his old skin. Having lost half of his own self, he was now trying to fill that void by acquiring something new. This new change was to be welcomed by some and abhorred by others. But as for whom, von Reuentahl could not say.

When the call ended, von Oberstein came in and appeared before Reinhard. He looked at the young lord as if conducting a scientific observation.

"Your Excellency, *Brünhild* can leave port in one hour."

"Very good. I'll head down in thirty minutes."

"And, Excellency, are you really comfortable with your decision regarding the Lichtenlade family?"

"I've spilled a lot of blood leading up to this point, and I'll likely have to spill a lot more going forward. What does the blood of the Lichtenlade family change? It's just adding a few more tears to the bucket."

"I hope you believe that."

"Leave me now. Go and do your work."

Von Oberstein bowed silently. When he lowered his head, his artificial eyes gave off a strange, inexplicable light.

Reinhard, having sent his chief of staff on his way, let his lanky frame sink back into his chair and turned his eyes toward the observation screen to gaze upon a sea of stars that he had to conquer.

His heart was starving. Kircheis was gone forever, and now he had even lost his sister as well.

If he ended the Goldenbaum Dynasty, created a new Galactic Empire, conquered the Free Planets Alliance, annexed the Phezzan Land Dominion, and became the ruler of the whole human race ... then would that hunger in his heart be sated?

No, it wouldn't, Reinhard thought. Even then, this hunger of the soul would not be satisfied. Most likely, it would not, could not, ever be.

And yet for Reinhard there was no longer any other road still remaining. All he could do to resist that emptiness in his heart was to keep fighting, keep winning, and keep conquering.

For that, he needed enemies. Powerful, competent enemies were the only thing that could make him forget his hunger. Even if he focused his energies for a while on shoring things up domestically, it was easy to see that a military clash with the Free Planets Alliance would be coming as early as next year. And in the alliance was the most powerful and competent enemy of them all.

IV

The powerful enemy of whom Reinhard was thinking was in an extremely bad mood at that moment.

After taking back Heinessen, he had traveled to Neptis, Kaffar, and Palmerend; accepted the surrender of rebel regiments on all three of those worlds; and had just now returned to the capital. That was when somebody calling himself a special envoy for the government had shown up and asked him to publicly shake hands with Chairman Trünicht at a ceremony sponsored by the government. It was an event planned to commemorate the victory of democracy over the forces of militarism, as well as the restoration of order under the Charter of the Alliance.

Yang's reaction had been spectacularly childish.

"Why do I and that jerkwad Trünicht"—here he realized he was shouting and modulated his tone—"and *Chairman* Trünicht have to shake hands with each other?"

Yang had considered it a grave misfortune when Trünicht had crawled out unscathed from his subterranean hideaway. Naturally, he took no joy in the fact that his presentiment had been right on the mark. A dazzlingly colorful curtain was just about to fall on a full program's worth of hideous farces.

No, actually. If the curtain fell, this would all be over in a theater; in reality, there was no guarantee that an encore wouldn't follow.

Yang felt disgusted from the bottom of his heart when he thought of Trünicht's monstrous ego. Things had gotten so bad that a coup d'état had actually broken out, yet instead of taking a good, hard look at his own political positions, here he was using political stunts and manipulating the masses in order to maintain his grip on power. To shake hands with that man on a stage in front of a crowd was no different to Yang than selling off his soul.

Yet going forward, the more battles he won, the higher he rose in position—in short, the more politically useful he became—the more he would find himself in this kind of situation. What could he do to keep that from happening?

Well, for one thing, he could lose. Charge into battle and lose miserably. If he

did that, his reputation would come crashing back down to earth, and the voices lauding him now would become his harshest critics overnight. The perfectly appropriate evaluation of “Murderer!” would be applied to him, and everyone would think it only natural that he should tender his resignation. Very few people, if anyone, would try to stop him.

Thus would Yang be rescued from the hell of public service. A quiet life, secluded from public view in some little corner of society, wouldn’t be bad at all. He could live in a little cottage among the rice paddies, where he would tilt back a glass of brandy on cold nights as he listened to the wind blowing outside. On rainy days, he would sip wine as he waxed nostalgic, thinking of the epic journey of water through the atmosphere.

“Just listen to me ... All I’d do is drink.”

Yang smiled wryly, and drove those quiet musings from his mind. Losing would certainly save him, but how many tens of thousands would be lost as a result? Losing would mean the deaths of a lot of people, with wives bereft of husbands, mothers bereft of sons, and children bereft of fathers.

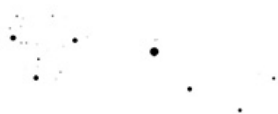
If he was going to fight, he had to win. And what would victory mean? It would mean killing a lot of enemy soldiers, ravaging the fabric of the enemy’s society, and ruining a lot of enemy families. The direction was different but the vector the same.

So ultimately, is it wrong to do either?

Almost exactly ten years had passed since Yang had graduated Officers’ Academy and become a soldier, but this problem he still couldn’t solve. It wasn’t beginner-level arithmetic, so no clear-cut answer was forthcoming, even when he grappled seriously with it. And even though he knew that trying to crack that question would get him lost in a labyrinth of thought, he couldn’t help thinking about it.

All that aside, though, the very idea that he had to shake hands with Job Trünicht ... !

He was not afraid of any payback that might follow if he refused. But since the point of this rally was to show the cooperation between the government and the military, he couldn’t just take a wrecking ball to that spirit of harmony, either. Yang believed that the military should be subservient to the government—and by extension, the people. That was why he had fought against the coup d’état faction to begin with.



The ceremony was held outdoors.

It was a beautiful day, with the gentle sunlight of early autumn enfolding the attendees, adding a film of gold to the leaves on the trees. Yang’s heart was nothing like the clear sky overhead, though.

I’m not shaking hands with Trünicht—I’m shaking hands with the chairman of the High Council in his role as head of state.

By thinking of it that way, Yang was somehow able to wrestle his emotions to

the ground. That line of reasoning was just a way of avoiding the truth, of course, and Yang's awareness of that only made his irritation mount.

It was because he had to put up with this kind of thing that promotions just weren't worth it. "You're getting ahead of the pack now" and "Oh, you're moving up in a world" envious people would say, but the thing about pyramids was that the closer you got to the top, the narrower and more treacherous the footing became. To Yang, it was a strange breed indeed that could be so fixated on elevating their status without ever considering their precarious footing.

All that aside, he couldn't get over how awkward he felt sitting in the VIP seats. Last year, at the memorial service following the Battle of Astarte, Yang's place had still been in the general-attendance section. Compared to now, his status at the time had been so much easier to deal with ...

Trünicht was speaking now. It was the empty eloquence of a second-rate agitator. He lauded the dead, he praised sacrifices made for the state, he told the people not to insist on their freedoms and their rights, because they were in the midst of a holy war to bring down the Galactic Empire. He'd been repeating the same thing for years.

People die, Yang thought. Stars have life spans too. Even the universe itself is gonna cease to exist someday. There's no way any state is going to be the only thing to survive forever. So if a state can't survive without making gigantic sacrifices, why should I care in the slightest if it falls tomorrow?

A voice called out to Yang as he was thinking about these things.

"Admiral Yang ..."

A friendly smile was brimming on the handsome face of Chairman Trünicht, who had returned to the VIP seats. It was a smile that had long bewitched an electorate of billions. It was sometimes said that his supporters cast their precious vote not for policies and ideas, but for that smile. Yang, of course, had never once been in that number since he had come of voting age.

"Admiral Yang," Trünicht said, "I'm sure there are lots of things you'd like to say to me, but today is a happy day—the fatherland is commemorating liberation from militaristic dictatorship. I don't think we should show our common enemies that the civil government and military don't see eye to eye. They'll use that against us."

Yang didn't answer.

"So just for today, let's both of us keep smiles on our faces and do our best not to upset our sovereigns—the people."

Yang certainly admired a man who was able to make a sound argument. But what about someone who made a sound argument while not believing in it for a minute? That doubt nagged at Yang every time he saw Trünicht.

"And now, everyone, there are two fighters here today—two warriors who battle every day for democracy, for our nation's independence, and for your freedom ... and we're about to see them shake hands right here. Let's have a big round of applause for our civilian leader Mr. Trünicht, and for Mr. Yang, representing our men and women in uniform!"

The one shouting these words was Aron Doumeck, who was emceeding the event. Doumeck had started out as a literary scholar, transformed himself into a political commentator, and then finally molted into a career politician. He was in Trünicht's inner circle and had discovered his *raison d'être* in attacking and

slandering his boss's political enemies, as well as all media organs that were critical of him.

Trünicht got up from his seat, waved to the crowd, and extended his hand toward Yang. Yang managed to stand up as well, but he was only barely controlling the urge to run from the stage and never look back.

When the two of them clasped hands, the cheers of the crowd swelled even louder, and the sound of their applause overwhelmed the open sky. Yang didn't want to hold that hand for even a second longer than he had to, but when he was freed at last from that bloodless torture, a totally unexpected thing occurred to him.

Had he been underestimating Trünicht all along?

That thought came shining into Yang's mind like a sunbeam through a break in the clouds. Struck by surprise so great that he actually stopped breathing for a second, he took another look at what he was thinking. Unsure himself why he had thought such a thing, he began to reexamine past events.

During the coup d'état, Trünicht hadn't done a thing. Sheltered by members of the Church of Terra, he had simply lain low underground.

It had been Yang Wen-li who had led the fleet and fought the battle, and it had been Jessica Edwards who had stood up for the people and fought back with speech and assemblies. Trünicht had not contributed so much as a gram to the eventual resolution. Yet here he was, alive and being showered with the crowd's adulation, while Jessica, brutally murdered, now lay in her grave.

And what about the ignominious Battle of Amritsar? Up until then, Trünicht could never help inserting his prowar rhetoric into every little thing, yet when the time came to vote on invading the empire, he had done an about-face and voted against the deployment. And the result of that thorough drubbing they had taken? Prowar apologists had lost the trust of the people, and their cause had lost ground. Meanwhile, Trünicht's popularity has risen relative to them, and now the former Defense Committee chairman had become chairman of the High Council and the alliance's head of state.

And then, there was the recent coup d'état ...

Nothing ever damaged Trünicht. Whenever something blew up, the ones who were damaged—the ones who fell—were always people other than Trünicht. Although he was the one who called for the storm, he was always hunkered down somewhere safe by the time it actually hit. Then, when the sky was clear, out he would come again.

Every time there was a crisis, he always seemed to be the last man standing without having lifted a finger, and without a finger being laid on him.

Yang shuddered. He had never yet feared being assassinated. He had never yet flinched in the face of enemy forces multiple times larger than his own. But now, in broad daylight with the sun shining down, Yang was seized by a sense of deep-seated terror.

Trünicht spoke to Yang again. He wore a perfectly controlled smile that had not a sliver of sincerity.

"Admiral Yang, the crowd is calling for you. Can't you give them what they want?"

Waves of adulation swelled high and low all around Yang. Mechanically, Yang waved back at these people who couldn't stop praising his virtual image.

Maybe this time he was overestimating Trünicht. Yang would've liked to think so. Still, it looked to him like it would be just a temporary escape if he did. Yang had gone and smelled a rat. Its stench had suffused the atmosphere and was becoming so thick he could hardly breathe.

V

When Yang got back to his house, he made a beeline for the washroom and washed his hands repeatedly with disinfectant. In that he was trying to wash off the filth of having clasped Trünicht's hand, Yang's mentality was on that point no different from a child's.

While Yang was holed up in the washroom, Julian was dealing with an uninvited guest in the foyer—an acquisitions editor from such-and-such publisher who had come to suggest that Yang write his memoirs.

"We're planning on a first printing of five million copies," he said.

If Yang were the sort of garden-variety historian he wanted to be, any book he published wouldn't move even a thousandth of that number.

"The admiral doesn't accept guests on private business at his official residence. Please leave him be."

Julian drove the editor away with appeals for formality, though the gun holstered on the boy's hip might have been more persuasive than his resolute attitude. While it clearly pained him to do so, leave the editor ultimately did.

Julian returned to the living room and put on some tea. Yang emerged from the washroom. The reason he was blowing on the backs of his hands was that he had scrubbed too hard and made his skin burn.

Yang put brandy, and Julian milk, into their tea and drank. Both of them were oddly quiet today, and for a while the only sound that filled the room was that of an antique clock counting off the seconds.

The two of them finished their first cups at almost exactly the same time. When Julian started to pour refills, Yang finally opened his mouth.

"It was dangerous out there today," he said.

Did something nearly hurt him? the boy wondered. Filled with surprise and a shade of nervousness, he stared at his guardian.

"No, it wasn't that," Yang said, wiping away the boy's anxiety. He spoke again while twirling his empty teacup around and around. "When I was with Trünicht, I kept feeling more and more disgusted, and then something just hit me from out of the blue. It was like, what's democracy worth when it gives legal authority to a man like that? And what are the people worth when they keep supporting him?"

He exhaled softly.

"And then I came to myself and felt terrified. Because I'd be willing to bet that a long time ago, Rudolf von Goldenbaum—and more recently, that bunch who staged the coup—thought exactly the same thing and arrived at exactly the same conclusion: *Only I can stop this*. It's utterly paradoxical, but the thing that turned Rudolf into a cruel dictator was his sense of responsibility and duty toward the whole human race."

When Yang's words trailed off, Julian, looking pensive, asked him, "Does Chairman Trünicht feel that kind of responsibility and duty?"

"Well, I don't know about him."

Yang didn't feel up to talking directly about the bizarre sense of terror he had felt toward the man. That would do nothing but worry the boy even more. *I'll just lock this away in my own thoughts for a while.*

Maybe Trünicht was to society what a cancer cell could be to the body—consuming the healthy cells' nutrition so that it alone would multiply, grow stronger and bigger, and at last kill its host. Trünicht would agitate for war one day, insist on democracy the next, and steadily increase his power and influence while never taking responsibility for anything he said. Therefore, the stronger he got, the weaker society would become, until he would finally consume it. And then those Terraists who sheltered him would ...

"Admiral ... ?"

Julian was staring at him with a worried look on his face. "Is something wrong?"

Reflexively, Yang gave the answer that everybody did in such situations—the answer that never helped at all: "No, it's nothing."

Just then, the visiphone in the next room started ringing.

Julian got up and went to get it. Yang, watching him as he went, quickly drank down his second cup of now lukewarm tea and poured brandy all the way up to the brim of his teacup.

Just as he was setting the bottle back down on the table, Julian came running back into the living room.

"Admiral, come quick! It's Rear Admiral Murai at Joint Operational Headquarters—"

As he brought the cup to his mouth, Yang said in an obsequious tone of voice, "What are you upset about? There's not a thing in this world worth rushing around and shouting over." The words sounded vaguely like something a philosopher might say. When Julian fired a "but" his way as vanguard to an objection, Yang quickly assumed the look of someone deep in thought.

"Excellency, do you know Admiral Merkatz?"

"He's a famous admiral in the Imperial Navy. Not as elegant and grand as Marquis von Lohengramm, but he's got age and experience, and no real weaknesses. And people like him. What about Admiral Merkatz?"

"Well, that famous Imperial Navy admiral"—Julian's voice was starting to get shrill—"has come here to defect! He wants your help defecting from the empire! There's been a communiqué from Admiral Caselnes saying he's just arrived at Iserlohn."

Yang had been instantly betrayed by his own philosophy. He stood up in a rush and banged his leg hard on the leg of the table.

VI

When Admiral Merkatz arrived at Iserlohn Fortress, he was greeted by Caselnes, who was the acting commander while Yang was away. After Merkatz was asked to hand over any weapons he was carrying, his aide von Schneider shouted with undisguised anger, "What did you say?! That's insulting! His Excellency Admiral Merkatz is not a prisoner of war. He's defected of his own free will. Proper decorum demands he be treated as a guest. Or does *decorum* not exist in the Free Planets Alliance?"

Caselnes acknowledged that von Schneider was correct, apologized, and while he was entertaining Merkatz's party as guests, had an FTL shot to Yang, who was staying on Heinessen.

Yang called a meeting of his advisors. Rear Admiral Murai, who had heard the story directly from Caselnes, said it was hard to believe.

"Tell me," Yang said to Murai, "did Admiral Merkatz have his family with him?"

"No, I asked Admiral Caselnes about that myself, and he said his family is still in the empire ..."

"Did he? That's good to hear."

"No, sir, it isn't. Saying his family's in the empire is the same as saying he's left them as hostages, as it were. Isn't the natural thing—the obvious thing—for us to assume he's come here for nonpeaceful reasons?"

"No, no, it isn't. First of all, if he really wanted to fool me, he'd never say his family was still in the empire. He'd probably show up with a fake family who would also have him under surveillance. Something like that."

Yang turned to look at one of his staff officers. "Mr. Bagdash, that's what intelligence would do if we were up to something, isn't it?"

"Well, that or something similar," said the man who had failed to kill Yang, had switched sides, and somewhere along the way had ended up as Yang's subordinate. "Admiral Merkatz is a dyed-in-the-wool warrior. He has nothing to do with spying or sabotage. I think we can trust him—"

"Way more than we can you!"

Bagdash frowned. "That's going beyond just a joke, Commodore von Schönkopf."

"Who says I'm joking?" von Schönkopf said indifferently.

Bagdash scowled.

After taking in the opposing viewpoints, Yang made his decision. "I'm going to trust Admiral Merkatz. And to the degree that I'm able, I'm going to protect his rights. If an experienced and decorated admiral of the empire wants me to take care of him, I can't very well disappoint."

"You're determined to go through with this?" asked Murai, looking rather displeased.

"I'm weak against flattery."

So saying, Yang had a direct FTL channel opened between Heinessen and Iserlohn.

After he was done talking to Caselnes, a sturdy-looking man in late middle age appeared on the viewscreen. Yang stood up and gave him a polite salute. "Admiral Merkatz, I presume. My name is Yang Wen-li. I'm very pleased to meet you."

Merkatz squinted as he stared at a dark-haired young man who didn't look at all like a creature of the military. If he'd had a son, would he have been right about that age?

Merkatz spoke: "This survivor of defeat is under your power, Excellency. I leave everything related to my disposition in your hands. I only ask that you show leniency with my subordinates."

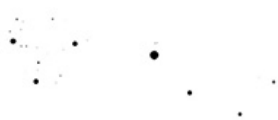
"You have some good ones, it seems."

Catching Yang's glance, von Schneider sat up straight in the corner of the

screen.

“In any case, I hereby agree to look after you. You’ve nothing to fear.”

Something about Yang’s way of speaking made Merkatz want to trust him. The defecting admiral realized that his aide’s advice had been right on the money.



At the same time that Yang was meeting Merkatz for the first time, several politicians were meeting at Trünicht’s residence on Heinessen: Negroponte, Capran, Bonet, Doumeck, and Islands—all of them leaders in Trünicht’s faction.

The discussion that day had to do with an enemy that was threatening them. By “enemy,” they didn’t mean the Galactic Empire or the domestic forces of militarism; they referred instead to a young man by the name of Yang Wen-li.

Once upon a time, the objective of these young politicians had been to acquire political power with Trünicht as their leader. Nowadays, however, the goal had shifted to maintaining their hard-won political power. In order to do so, there was, of course, a need to eliminate others who might possibly take that power away from them. Up until now, they had been on guard against Jessica Edwards, the face of the antiwar movement, but she had been brutally murdered by the coup d’état faction at the stadium. Their enemy had done them the favor of killing their enemy.

Their boss set a glass of whiskey mixed with water on the table and said, “Being as it was an internecine conflict this time, we can give Admiral Yang a medal and be done with it. The next time he has a military success, though, we’ll have no choice but to promote him again.”

“A marshal, when he’s just turned thirty?” Capran’s lips twisted into a smirk.

“After which he retires from active duty and goes into politics. A famous, undefeated admiral, young, and on top of that, single. There’s no doubt he’d be elected by a wide margin.”

“He’d be elected, but the problem after that would be his political acumen. After all, a great general on the battlefield doesn’t necessarily translate to a thoroughbred in the political sphere.”

“Still, people will gather around him, attracted by his fame. People with no ideals, just a hunger for power. Once that happens, he’ll be a force to be reckoned with. In terms of quantity of support, if not quality.”

Their boss was by no means telling them this as a result of having reflected seriously on this group’s own governance. Those who listened didn’t find that in any way odd, either. To them, justice was that which protected their privilege, and that kind of thinking was the common point of departure for all of their ideas.

“You know what he said to all his officers and soldiers just before the Battle of Doria? That the survival of the state was insignificant compared to freedom and individual rights. I think that was inexcusable.”

“It’s a dangerous idea,” Doumeck agreed, leaning forward. “Follow that to its logical conclusion, and it means that as long as freedoms and individual rights

are protected, he would be fine with the alliance crumbling and being replaced by the empire. I can't help feeling a niggling little doubt about his loyalty to the fatherland."

"And that is material we should make a point of remembering. As things unfold, more is bound to come out."

Yang, who had heard this kind of conversation before, had no intention of becoming a politician himself; if he did retire from active duty, he'd live off his pension while becoming an amateur historian. But even if he were to tell them that clearly, he would not be believed; all they would do was smile at him sardonically. Since they used themselves as the standard, they didn't believe there was any such thing as a person who didn't crave power.

Trünicht himself spoke for the first time. "The alliance needs Admiral Yang's abilities. After all, we do have another enemy—the Galactic Empire. Still, it does a man good to fail at something every once in a while, as long as it's not something critical." Both corners of Trünicht's mouth turned upward, forming a masklike smile in the shape of a crescent moon. "Still, there's no need to panic either way. Don't let it get to you. Let's just wait a bit and watch how things unfold."

All of those present nodded, and the topic shifted to a pair of female singers who had lately divided the support of Heinessen's music lovers.

As for Trünicht, he was thinking about Yang Wen-li, and the group's chatter went in one ear and out the other. Once, when he had been giving a speech, that young man had been the only one in the crowd to keep his seat when it was time for the audience to stand. Even when he had shaken his hand at the victory ceremony, he had not opened up. In his talents, in his psychological makeup, in all kinds of ways, he was a man of hidden dangers. There was no need to panic, but eventually a decision would have to be made: make him fall in line or eliminate him? If it were up to Trünicht, he would choose the former. That way would provide him with a powerful ally—equal even to the Terraists who had helped him when he needed to lie low. Not like these lapdogs in front of him now ...

In order to make that happen, he would have to use a small but ... generous strategy.

VII

Imperial year 488, October.

Reinhard von Lohengramm was made a duke in the aristocracy, whereupon he assumed the seat of imperial prime minister. The title he had won already of supreme commander of the Imperial Navy remained in his hands, unchanged. Thus did the golden-haired youth monopolize the two great powers of the civil government and the military.

It was here that the Lohengramm system of autocracy came to fruition. The six-year-old emperor, Erwin Josef II, was the marionette of a chief vassal who was holding the strings of real power—a state unchanged since the year prior. The only thing different was that the number of strings had been reduced from two to one.

Gerlach, who had served as vice prime minister under Lichtenlade, managed to

save the lives of himself and his family by voluntarily surrendering his position and accepting house arrest. Those who had supported Duke Reinhard von Lohengramm also received new positions.

Von Reuentahl, Mittermeier, and von Oberstein were all promoted to senior admiral, while Kempf, Wittenfeld, Wahlen, Lutz, Mecklinger, Müller, Kessler, and Fahrenheit, who had surrendered, were made full admirals.

Bestowed upon the late Siegfried Kircheis was the rank of imperial marshal, which was added to the titles he had held over the course of his life: minister of Military Affairs, director of Command Headquarters, commander in chief of the Imperial Space Armada. Furthermore, he was given two other titles: acting supreme commander of the Imperial Military, and special advisor to the imperial prime minister. No matter how many worldly honors he might bestow upon him, Reinhard felt it impossible to reward his redheaded friend in full. However, the epitaph he chose for Kircheis's grave was simplicity itself:

MY FRIEND

That was all.

Annerose moved to the mountain villa in Freuden where she and the boys had spent her vacation.

Yang Wen-li, on the other hand, remained an admiral. If the enemy he had defeated had been the Galactic Empire, and if other active-duty marshals had been in the service, Yang would surely have been given the rank of marshal himself. However, the director of Joint Operational Headquarters and the commander in chief of the space armada were both admirals, so it wouldn't do to give a higher rank to a leader of combat forces who had to answer to them both—that was how the government explained it. To Yang, it didn't matter at all.

What Yang did receive was a number of ostentatiously named medals: Free Warrior First Class, Glory of the Republic, the Heinessen Memorial Award for Outstanding Military Service, and more. When he got home, Yang noticed that the little boxes that the medals came in were just the right size, so he used them to keep bars of soap in and tossed the medals themselves into a corner of his locker. Julian supposed that the only reason he didn't throw them away was that he was planning to eventually sell them off to an antique dealer and use the money to buy history books and liquor.

What Yang had been happier about than the medals was that he had managed to get Merkatz a status of "guest admiral"—meaning he was to be treated as a vice admiral. He had also had him named "special advisor to Iserlohn Fortress commander." Eventually, he was sure to become an admiral officially, and having Merkatz's experience in fighting enemies to the fore, as well as his prudence in dealing with allies to the aft, would surely be of great help to Yang. Particularly since a major battle against Duke von Lohengramm of the empire might be coming as soon as next year.

Yang's subordinates, too, were buried under mountains of medals and letters of appreciation, but since Yang himself wasn't promoted, their ranks stayed the same as well ... with one exception. Due to his accomplishments in the battle to liberate Shanpool, von Schönkopf advanced to rear admiral. This was because the residents of Shanpool had strongly demanded it, it was explained, but with there being only one promotion, a crack appeared in the Yang Fleet's unity, and one theory even claimed that the promotion had been ordered out of spite by Admiral

Dawson, acting director of Joint Operational Headquarters. Admiral Cubresly had been released from the hospital and would be returning to active duty soon, so this was Admiral Dawson's final act as acting director.

Also, while certainly not a matter of high-ranking officers, Julian's military equivalency was changed from lance corporal to sergeant. Now he was a junior officer. It was said that Chairman Trünicht had personally put in a good word for him, but regardless of how Julian had gotten there, this meant that he now had the qualification needed to board assault craft such as spartanians. For Yang, this meant that the decision about whether or not to honor the boy's wish to enlist was closing in on him.

Also, Captain Bay advanced to rear admiral and was named Trünicht's head of security. Although he was believed at first to have participated in the coup d'état, he had in fact informed the council chair of the plot, and in recognition of his having helped the head of state escape, he had not merely been forgiven but had been given an entirely new position.

It was also during this period that a trader from Phezzen by the name of Boris Konev arrived on Heinessen and took a job in the commissioner's office ...



On a frontier planet several thousand light-years removed from the imperial capital of Odin, a meeting was being held in an old stone building in an out-of-the-way corner of a desolate mountainous region.

After listening to what the men in black robes had to say, an old man who was also wearing black said in a dry voice, "It's not that I don't understand your complaints. In the recent struggle, Rubinsky was not necessarily efficient. That's certainly true."

"It's not only that, Your Holiness. It's rather the lack of passion he engenders. All I can think is he's forgotten our goal and has gone running off after his own interests. 'Another two or three years.' 'Another two or three years.' That's all he says."

Filled with indignation, a relatively younger voice replied: "Don't get impatient. We've waited eight hundred years—another two or three mean nothing. For now, let's give Rubinsky time. If he's abandoned Mother Earth, the next trip he takes will be to the grave."

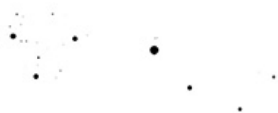
The Grand Bishop stared at the western horizon beyond the window. A shining disk of orange was dyeing the land and the sky in brilliant evening colors. The sun showed not the slightest sign of aging, but what of Earth? Though praised in song for bringing life to the universe, it was merely the doddering, geriatric offspring of that brilliant sun now.

The trees had withered, the soil had lost its nutrients, and the birds and the fish had practically vanished from the sky and the sea. And after polluting and destroying the world that was its mother, the human race had abandoned this planet, rushing hurriedly off to their foolish slaughters among the stars.

That would last only a little bit longer, though. Humanity's homeland would be

revived, and once again, it would be from Earth that history began. The last eight centuries of misbegotten history, the history of that period when humanity had abandoned the Earth, had to be erased.

It wasn't as if there wasn't any progress on that front. After all, the leader of one of the two great powers had fallen under their spell. Eventually, the other surely would as well. Beneath the dry, withered skin of the Grand Bishop, a burning certainty was growing.



SE 797, IC 488. An unusual year, in that the flames of war did not blaze between the two powers dividing humanity. Vast energies had been expended by both on civil wars and their resolutions, but unlike years past, they had been unable to launch large-scale military expeditions at one another.

Both of their civil wars had produced victors, but whether those victors were satisfied with their victories was another matter altogether. As one gained something enormous while losing something dear, the other increased in allies while a danger from behind increased as well.

In any case, in times such as these, one year's tranquility did nothing at all to guarantee peace for the following year. The Galactic Empire and the Free Planets Alliance, and both of their peoples, felt that this year of undeclared truce was only a promise of more war in the next year and couldn't help feeling more uneasy instead of less.

That year, Reinhard von Lohengramm was twenty-one, and Yang Wen-li was thirty. Both still had more future in their lives than past.

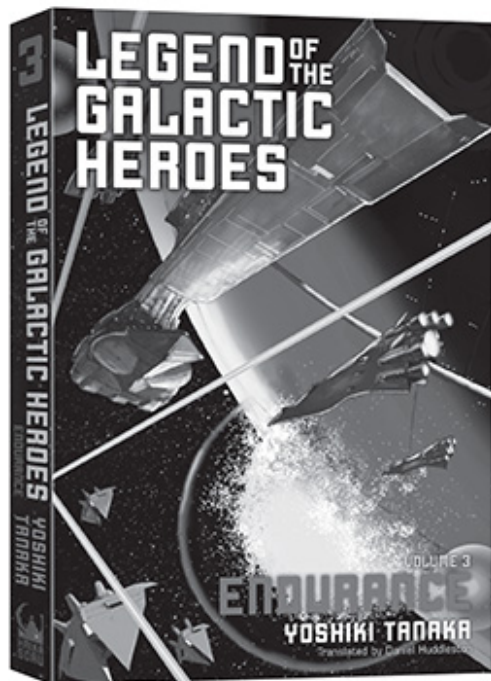
about the author

Yoshiki Tanaka was born in 1952 in Kumamoto Prefecture and completed a doctorate in literature at Gakushuin University. Tanaka won the Gen'eijo (a mystery magazine) New Writer Award with his debut story "Midori no Sogen ni..." (On the green field...) in 1978, then started his career as a science fiction and fantasy writer. Legend of the Galactic Heroes, which translates the European wars of the nineteenth century to an interstellar setting, won the Seiun Award for best science fiction novel in 1987. Tanaka's other works include the fantasy series The Heroic Legend of Arslan and many other science fiction, fantasy, historical, and mystery novels and stories.

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